

THE  
SINKING SHIP

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EVA LATHBURY







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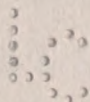


# THE SINKING SHIP

BY

EVA LATHBURY

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THE LONG GALLERY



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# THE SINKING SHIP

## CHAPTER I

### THE COURTESY CURTAIN

It was close on twelve of an April morning, and the sunlight flickered cheerfully over the frontage of a red-brick house in Barkston Gardens, S.W.

A housemaid was at work in the drawing-room on the first floor, but in dilatory fashion. She was a small, plump girl, with a pert face, pink as her cotton gown, and it was plain that her real attention belonged to the young footman stretched at full length in his master's favorite chair before the hearth. At intervals she gave a toss to her yellow head, she snorted; finally, as though the occasion called for yet sterner measures, she pushed a stool noisily across the parquetry floor, mounted it and proceeded to scrub with her duster



the surface of the life-size portrait at which her companion was gazing.

“A devilish fine woman,” was all she got, however, in return for this manoeuvre, and she descended from her perch as brusquely as she had ascended.

“Think so?” she replied, stepping backwards as though to get a more comprehensive view of the painted lady. “Not my style,” and she ran her feather brush disdainfully round as much of the frame as she could reach.

“No—not in the least your style, Maude.”

“Give me a bit of fresh color, Mr. Roberts, give me a face you ain’t afraid to touch with soap and water.”

“Give us, in short, the ‘bowty doo dabble.’”

“Precisely,” the young woman agreed with a quite creditable air of acquaintance with the term.

“And yet from the hupper succle, Maude, there’s a fine heffect; the figure is still magnificent.”

“Oh, come now, Mr. Roberts—you know as



well as I do that that's stays. If I paid three guineas a pair——"

"If you paid thirty guineas a pair," he broke in with authority, "you wouldn't look like that."

"And who wants to look like that, pray? That figure isn't everybody's money, let me tell you; if you arsked me I'd say it's a deal more suited to a serpent than a woman—wriggle and slither and glide—ugh! times out of number she's given me the jumps with her sneaky comings in and goings out, and you might say 'goings on,' " she added with an inflection of malice, "and not be far out."

"The serpent," replied the imperturbable one, "'as always hexercised a spell, Maude, on my himagination; *she* hexercises a spell, and deny it I can't in common fairness to the woman."

"You're too much in the theater, Mr. Roberts—that's the long and short of it. It's them red lights. Why, some of them chorus girls (as they call themselves) are turned forty to my knowledge, and there you see 'em skippin' about like lit-



tle lambs. You ain't taken 'er tea in at seven of a morning, Mr. Roberts. I tell you it's all flummery."

"Some of it's flummery, Maude, but some of it's—what shall I say now?"

"Well, the papers talks of genius," the girl admitted slowly, as though compelled towards the reminder by something dominating in the pictured eyes above her; "but what is genius when all's said and done?"

The footman raised a pair of well-tended hands in fervent expostulation.

"Don't talk of genius my dear; a genius is a pusson as lies in bed all mornin', rests in the hafternoon, and gets lively towards teatime; it turns night into day and day into night; if it's a man it wears it's 'air long, and if it's a woman it prefers it short; it heats when other folks is sleepin' and sleeps when they're heatin', and it isn't to be counted on hunder hany circumstances whatsoever; what it says to-day it contradicts to-morrow, and as to hopenin' doors to visitors, there



ain't nothin' to go by, not kerridges nor clothes, nor yet titles; you turns orf a little dowdy, hall paint and wrinkles, and gets the sack; you lets hin a duchess and gets your 'ead blown orf, before the lady as like as not. Don't talk of geniuses; they've been the bane of my life; there's no hac-countin' for 'em, no trustin' 'em, no pleasure in working yourself to death for 'em."

"Well, then, what do you sit starin' at 'er for? She's a genius. Why don't you clear out instead of talking of spells and such-like rubbish?"

"There's the master to consider."

"The master? Why, he's the bigger genius of the two to my thinking. Look at that there pile of halbums—twice as big as 'ers; speaks for itself." But the footman shook an obstinate head.

"That's only because there's more woman fools in London than men fools. The master a genius? Not a bit of it; the master's a gentleman, Maude, a gentleman through and through. You watch 'im come into a room. I couldn't do it in better



style myself with half my years of training. You watch 'im 'elp 'imself at table; no grabbin', no beastly fuss, but—'e always gets the best of heverything. Same with 'is clothes; no joolry, no flash, but there ain't a better turned-out man in this town, though I says it that shouldn't, seein' that I valet him. Yes, take 'im half in half——” but the quotation was interrupted by the inopportune entrance of Mr. Story, the butler, and the quoter scrambled to his feet, groping wildly at the lid of the coal-box by way of explaining his presence in the room if not his attitude of relaxation. Story was of the good bow-window type of domestic, with a whiskered face, pale, ponderous and puffy; he crossed the room and laid a bundle of papers and letters on the desk beside his master's chair and he looked sternly from the man to the girl; then, without comment, he ran a fat forefinger along the ebony case of the grand piano and submitted it to the inspection of the now obtrusively pink Maude.

“Well, Mr. Story, I can't do heverything at



once, not 'avin' two pairs of 'ands; if you'd wait till a-body was through before breakin' hout in this way with your complaints and your hobjections and your hinsinations it 'ud be fairer."

"If I waited till you were through, Miss Pert, I'd be in my grave."

"Well, I don't know as hanybody wants to keep you hout of your grave," the girl muttered, to the delight of the retreating Roberts, but Mr. Story, who was uncomfortably aware of his own weakness in the art of repartee, feigned inattention and contented himself with altering the arrangement of the room with a fine air of patience.

"The fact is," he observed judicially, "you're too young for the place, Maude, and so I've said from the first."

"That's better than being too old," she snapped, and retired under cover of the retort.

Left to himself, the man's expression altered—it became solicitous, almost tender; his touch upon the articles he fingered smacked of reverence and always he appeared to listen with the anxiety of a



faithful dog for the sound of a footstep from outside.

But when, presently, the door reopened to admit a woman, it was plain that she was not the bright and particular star on this limited horizon, though Vanda Conquest—more generally known perhaps under her stage name of Vanda Fane—looked quite remarkable enough to pose as a luminary. Her form at all events endorsed the eulogy of her footman;—full and fine, obedient from earliest youth to the laws of mental as well as physical culture, it seemed perfectly adapted to define the values of expression and repression. Instinct with vitality to her finger-tips, she was also instinct with the determination to control the output of that same fund of vitality. To old Story, to young Roberts, to her world in general, she was compelling rather than dear, the puzzle rather than the idol. But as she came slowly forward with a shiver of her long, loose, brown draperies, as she reached the pool of sunlight in the middle of the room, the radiance even



of the puzzle appeared to evaporate a little. The eye of a connoisseur would have lost some of its ecstasy, have wandered furtively to the portrait on the wall, for in the painter's model the colors had begun to run, to fade, to be replaced, alas, by makeshift ones. The face, with its small, fine features, had been carefully tinted with pink; the thick hair, parted down the middle and curled loosely about the neck and perfect ears, showed a heterogeneous collection of shades, ranging from amber to a dusky red; the lashes and brows were black—just a degree too black—and the long, red-brown eyes wore at the moment an expression both sullen and inert—the early-morning look of one who, like a cat, takes her pleasure in the night-season. And as she stood facing thus the portrait of twenty years ago, this same critical eye would have found yet another flaw, for the oval curve, indicative of youth, had been disturbed at that most fatal spot immediately below the cheekbone; the face had fallen a trifle, though the lost line of beauty had been recaptured



almost at once and ran in a fine, bold sweep from chin to throat, from throat to shoulder and on and through the whole vibrant, grandly-molded body. For a minute or two she stood blinking rather stupidly at the traitorous sunlight, then, with a frown, she moved into the bow-window, lowered the blind, shook out the heavy, damask curtains of rose brocade, pushed a chair into the circle of tempered light that filtered through them, and seated herself with the grace and deliberation of the practised poser. And now the picture had undergone a second transformation. It was precisely as though a clever artist had passed a sponge over a too crude water-color. The hair now showed bronze-like, the face pale, the mouth a satisfying scarlet—all effect of waste had disappeared, or rather been absorbed into one of picturesque melancholy. She sat very still, her eyes upon the carpet, and the old man watched her with mingled admiration and distress; more than once he opened his mouth to address her, but closed it again and it was not until the door reopened that



the tension, under which he so obviously labored, was relaxed. To the master of the house he turned with a quite pathetic air of devotion, hurrying forward to give a last turn to the angle of the chair upon the hearth, to rearrange, for the tenth time, the papers on the actor's table.

Adrian Conquest was some years older than his wife, but he still possessed all the smooth and pleasing characteristics of youth. His features were perhaps too aggressively regular, but even this questionable defect had been redeemed by the bright and humorous quality of the eye, while the thin-lipped, shaven mouth had learnt, like Vanda's lithe body, the value of pliancy. He was famous on the boards for his facial work, for the delicacy of the impressions he could convey with what appeared the minimum of effort.

"Morning, Vanda. Story, you old reprobate, you were an hour behind time with my shaving-water."

"Well, sir—yes, I did presume to give orders.



A first night you know, sir—the strain, and you sleeping like a baby.”

His master laughed, the typical stage laugh, which was at once a pardon and a caress to the servant, and an invitation to his wife to share the atmosphere of gaiety and good-humor—an invitation to which she responded by a sarcastic lift of the short, upper lip.

With a slight shrug he turned to his writing-table and picked up the topmost of the pile of daily papers.

“And what’s the verdict below stairs, Story? I always begin with the basement, you know.”

“Just as usual, sir, only a little more so.”

The laugh came from the woman this time, but it was drowned by her husband’s cheery voice.

“Another walk over, eh?”

“Why, of course, sir; best thing you’ve ever put on.”

“I seem to have heard that remark before,” Vanda observed, and the butler turned to her with pathetic disregard of any irony. “Yes,



ma'am, it was a pretty general remark last night—in our part of the theater—the dresses that wonderful, and the moonlight in act two——” but she interrupted him with scant ceremony.

“It was an excellent moon, I'll allow, but there was an even more excellent one out in the street to be seen for nothing. Don't tell me the public pays to see a fine counterfeit of the moon.”

“No, ma'am, of course not; but there was you, ma'am, beautiful as a picture.”

“A picture! Yes, to be sure; but there again we've a rival. What of the Tate Gallery? Hundreds of pictures, the best in the land, and nothing to pay, unless it's a penny for your umbrella.”

“Well, ma'am, there was the story, such a pretty tale of love and valor. It brought the tears to my eyes every minute.”

“Tales of love!” she mocked lightly. “But there's the library, Story; for twopence a week you're cordially invited to cry your eyes out.”

Nonplused he looked for succor, but only to



find his master immersed in the dramatic column of the *Times*.

"It was a great night, ma'am," he said, with the obstinacy of little Wilhelmina of poetic fame. "Folks were turned away by the dozen, and we were packed that tight I'd a job to breathe."

"Full! By Jove! yes," Conquest put in cheerily, changing his paper. "Lawson's in the seventh heaven of satisfaction. Packed, Vanda, from stalls to gallery, and could have been filled twice over, and just listen to this: 'Seldom has Miss Fane given us a more finished and charming representation of sweet, English girlhood. In the line she has now for so many years been steadily pursuing we do not hesitate to say she is without a rival, and, if that line runs into no very mysterious channel of thought, we are not disposed to cavil. The problem-play and the *femme incomprise* flourish elsewhere; in this pretty and comfortable theater one can be assured of finding recreation confined well within the bounds of good taste. As for Mr. Conquest, he is younger, hand-



somer, than twenty years ago, and infinitely more polished. Can one say more?' etc., etc. Sounds about right; and they're all much the same: 'A big success'; 'an undoubted success'; 'quite as successful as anything of its kind'; 'the success of the season'; 'dainty in the extreme'; 'lavishly put on'; 'admirably portrayed'—he picked a sentence here and there from his pile, and to each Story nodded an eager, almost a joyous agreement.

"Just what I said, sir—just what we all said downstairs, sir. The public knows—the public won't be put off with trash; but there's my front-door bell, and that man Roberts is as deaf as a post."

He hurried off, his bearing almost jaunty, his last look—thrown towards the figure in the window—one of defiance. As the door closed behind him Conquest began to read again, ignorant of, or else indifferent to, that sullen glance with which his wife regarded him.

"It is impossible to find a flaw in last night's



representation. Lovely women and brave men pass before the eye in delicious garments and harmonious groups; one can enjoy the performance as one enjoys an expensive cigar, with no qualms as to its later disagreement with one's constitution. All who seek the theater for recreation only will appreciate Mr. Conquest's latest venture; a kind bachelor uncle seeking to amuse a schoolgirl niece, a shy wooer, anxious to prosper his romantic cause, could do no better than visit this delightful theater where, for so many years, we have been treated to the fantasy of life as it might have been, never has been, and never will be. But who wants sordid reality in leisure hours? Let us be grateful for illusion——' What are you laughing at? "

"At you. But never mind—read me some more; read me the one you dropped into the waste-paper basket so unobtrusively."

"With pleasure," he said, equably, stopping to secure the sheet in question. "I rather like a little of their satire myself—shows they've been



roused. Let's see—yes—here we are: 'There have been so many thorns of late among the roses of the stage that it would perhaps be hardly tactful to complain of last night's flowery production; the flowers, too, were so perfect of their kind—they were offered with so much grace and generosity, and yet—with shame we own it—the invitation to siesta scarcely seemed opportune. We had a sense of being put to sleep on a narcotic a degree too mild to do the trick. To be sure we were regaled at intervals by pretty bursts of passion, but it was toy-passion; we were treated to the occasional murder of a villain—the discomfiture of a libertine—but these excesses were committed with one hand, so to speak, tied behind the back and the other half smothered in Honiton lace; we yawned—it was ungrateful, but, alas, unavoidable; we came away with the uncomfortable and unkind impression of having taken part in a Barmecide Feast.' Oh, what awful rot!"

He pitched the condemnatory article aside and turned to find her crossing the room.



"It isn't rot," she said, "it's true—it's something we've got to face."

"It's the blues," he amended, as she took the arm of his chair; "they've never failed us after a new production. Let 'em out, dear; it soothes you and it don't worry me."

"Does anything ever worry you, Adrian?"

"Not that I know of."

"And you're nearly forty-nine."

"Hush, hush! the walls have ears."

"And you're not afraid of those ears—that's the trouble; you don't care, you don't change, you don't age. Look up there at our two portraits."

"What's the matter with them?"

"Nothing. There was nothing the matter with us—with me—when they were painted; but now—look, look—I'm a caricature. No, don't deny it—it's impossible to deny it."

"Then I won't. I'll take the picture down and have you repainted."

"Never—never; that picture is my consolation as well as my torment, for I was once like that—



I was once greater than that; the painter used to drop his head upon his hand and groan because—because there wasn't a color in his box that would express my buoyancy; but he caught something, he preserved something—something that these men"—she struck the bundle of newspapers viciously—"would take away."

"What am I to say, Vanda, to all this?"

"Say what you think," she begged with sudden tenderness, "say what you really think, not just what's likely to be soothing."

"I'm afraid I think this scene unnecessary. According to general opinion we've made another hit—a hit quite good enough to run the season."

"And when the season's run?"

"Sufficient, dearest, unto the day——"

"No," she broke in impetuously; "that's where your common-sense fails. The piece might run the season, but it would be a last run for us."

"Vanda!"

"Adrian, there was a threat in every one of



those notices, and you can't, or you won't, see them. There you sit as you used to sit when that picture was taken, line for line the same, handsome and smug, for all the world as though but a single decade of years had gone over you. What does it mean? It frightens me, this evasion of common law. Why are you never ill? Why are you never cross? You're close to me, and yet you're an utter stranger—you've always been a stranger; the love I gave you long ago comes back to me at moments like an unopened letter—it hasn't been received. You don't receive anything but your day's rations. No, it's no use trying to hush me up. I've smoldered a long time. I'm going to have some sort of an eruption. I'll show you something."

She re-crossed the room to rummage in an *escritoire*, and when she returned she had a crumpled newspaper of ancient appearance in her hand.

"This was written a few months before our marriage. 'Miss Fane is an erratic, undeveloped



creature, but in her refusal to toe the line one seems to read a promise of that quality which, for want of a better term, we christen genius. As a child-actress she earned an enviable reputation, but it is a well-known fact that these precocious triumphs seldom survive the bud, and it is with unfeigned pleasure that we remark in this case a tendency to robust development. If Miss Fane has still a great deal to learn, we fancy she has also a great deal to teach, and we sincerely hope that the spirit of the times—which might be interpreted as the spirit of policy—will not be permitted to woo this quite remarkable young person into the primrose path.’

“You know as well as I do,” she added fiercely, “that I *was* wooed into it, for you were the wooer, and last night we reached the culminating point of our disgrace. That treacly story of life, that travesty of existence, makes me feel sick, though I’ve been steadily educated down to it. But to talk of success—to swallow those journalistic satires without a qualm; to set up Story—



Story and his servants' hall—as a bulwark to the fallacy—I've not come down to that. Why, there isn't a reviewer of the lot who hasn't his dig at us; I only wonder they'd the patience and the kindness to do it so gently. I've been cramped by you and that ridiculous manager of yours till I'm no more than a specialist in triviality, until I'm the butt of every pressman in town, the secret scorn of realist and idealist alike. No—don't move—I haven't finished—I've only just begun."

"This is quite the worst attack of nerves, my dear Vanda, that we've enjoyed together. I'm at a loss how to treat it."

"There's only one way in which you never treat my moods?"

"And what may that be?"

"With sincerity. Try it for once on me and on the occasion."

"But, my dear girl——"

"But, my dear, blind, deaf man, everybody understands the position except you and your beloved Lawson. Even Story understands it,



though he'll die gladly with a lie on his lips."

"But the reviews—read 'em for yourself, Vanda."

"I *have* read them while you were sleeping like a baby. I know—I tell you I know only too well—what I'm talking about—what *they'll* be talking about in a week or two. My 'finished study,' my 'sweet gowns,' my 'pretty movements'—bah! they once spoke of something besides polish; they were carried out of the beaten track of their stock phrases and praises; they argued over me and round me and at me; they didn't lacquer me with a coat of satiric approval; they didn't suggest, with all due deference, I should go this way or that; they followed the lead of that undeveloped spirit of genius with more or less appreciation. 'Seldom has Miss Fane given us a more dainty and gracious performance.' Oh, I understand the verdict, though it's so admirably non-committal. These men know their business and, what's more, they perform it with decency."

"Let me remind you," he said, with a rare



touch of impatience, "that there were five curtains to each act."

"Courtesy curtains, Adrian. Do you suppose I can't distinguish between courtesy and enthusiasm? Have I never tasted bread to be deceived by the stone? There were five proofs of the truth of what I'm telling you—that the public and its mouthpieces have a sense of decency, even a sense of gratitude. They don't bury us the moment the breath goes out of our bodies; they allow a period for tears, for lying-in-state, they cover us with flowers, they honor us with kind and pitiful looks, they talk and they write of 'the great dead,' 'the good dead.' I died last night, or they think I did, and I'm being treated to my fine funeral, to my wreaths and tributes, to my five curtains; to-night there will be four, to-morrow three; soon, very soon, there will be empty benches, the mourners will go home, having done their duty, and we two shall be left in the graveyard. You won't mind, you'll find it quite a comfortable sleeping-place; but I'm not an Indian



slave to be burnt alive with your dead body; I'm not for the graveyard yet, I'm for escape; there's a line of retreat, there's just one line of retreat."

"Well, my dear?"

"Well," she mocked, "is that all you've got to say?"

"Not quite. I may be a paralytic of sorts, but let me remind you I'm not an unkind or malicious paralytic. There's no occasion for that look of enmity."

"No, no. Forgive me, Adrian; I'm half mad with inner revolt and fear, and if you were to refuse me this last chance, if you were to talk—to let Lawson talk of expense——" She stopped, eyeing him with anxiety.

"Ah, I begin to see daylight. You're paving the way for a rather drastic remedy—a new production, eh? Have you any idea what that affair of last night is going to figure out at?"

"I know we can't afford to play it often," she retorted.



“But there’s really nothing—nothing whatever in our line.”

She followed his glance to the writing-table, where a pile of manuscript was visible.

“Our line has failed. We must try another.”

“You’ve found something, Vanda?”

She nodded, still with a nervous eye on him.

“And what’s the name of your selection?”

“‘The Sinking Ship.’”

“Not an ingratiating title,” he commented, after what seemed to her a long interval of time.

“We’ve not an ingratiating tale to tell, Adrian. Idylls are played out. We’re no longer children; we’re no longer young and sportive and gallant, and the public’s tired of hearing us declare we are; it’s tired of our fancy dresses and scenic effects. We can’t hold it any longer by pretenses, but we might hold it by the truth. The truth isn’t much to look at, and it isn’t easy to express, but it might be made interesting; it’s been made interesting—extraordinarily interesting.”

Again she crossed the room and took the top-



most manuscript. "You've read it, I suppose?"

"Perfunctorily. It's the work of a boy, of course, and lamentably deficient in the knowledge of stagecraft."

"Hadden Renshaw," she murmured. "The name isn't quite unfamiliar. Can you place it?"

"Only son of a bigwig in the city," he said carelessly—"a product of young Oxford, letting off steam; broken loose from his family, I heard, on account of these high flights of opinion."

"Ah, that accounts, Adrian. There's the bite of sacrifice in his work, and I believe in him. You've got to believe in him too, for he's our last chance. Last night that theater was an arena. I looked round it, and I saw what the despairing gladiator sees when he lifts his torn body from the dust and sues for mercy—*all the thumbs were down.*"

"Dearest, isn't this a trifle theatrical?"

"Well, and aren't we face to face with a crisis? I've got to stoke up if I'm to persuade you to take the last tide at the ebb."



“Lawson will make a devil of a row, and it’s a risky venture at the best. Sure there’s not a personal element about?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, my recollection of the stuff’s a bit hazy, but isn’t it a sort of cap suited, we’ll say, to a woman past her teens?”

“Suited, in point of fact, to me, Adrian. It is; but whether there’s anything beyond coincidence in the championship, I’m not prepared to say. I’m as much at sea as you are. It’s a puzzle. He certainly doesn’t do his worshiping (if it is personal worship) from the stalls; I must have spotted him. On the whole I’m inclined to think it’s abstract defense. He’s fighting for a principle; he’s ranging himself on the side of an ideal.”

“And that ideal?”

“Is, of course, the immortality of art, the in-consequence of time and time’s weapons, the restoration of a lost or vitiated point of view. All I know is that I shall give you and myself no



peace till it's in rehearsal, and probably very little then."

"In that case, my dear, I'll make a virtue of necessity."

"You'll stand up to Lawson, and at once?"

"We'd better interview the young man first. Will you write or shall I?" But even as she mused upon the question there came a tap upon the door, followed by the entrance of Story.

"Very sorry, ma'am," he began in an aggrieved tone, "I've said 'not at 'ome,' persistent and continual, but 'ere 'e is again. Seven times in all, sir. It's about a play—one of them no doubt"—he pointed a disdainful finger. "Wants a hinter-view, and won't take a 'no.' Perhaps you'd allow me to tell the young gentleman as we've now no call for new work this season."

"Tell him instead that, seven being the lucky number, we're willing to see him."

The order came from Vanda, and the old man looked at his master with a blend of incredulity and appeal, but a light gesture of dismissal dis-



posed of any hopes he might have entertained concerning contradiction. Very slowly he turned and left the room, very slowly he made his way down the broad staircase. He put a trembling hand upon the banisters, for he was afraid. He was afraid of the pert housemaid, whose tongue could outrun his own; he was afraid of the footman, whose talents as a valet brought him consideration; he was afraid, horribly afraid, of the visitor in the hall below. These people were the young—the new régime. He didn't carry the argument of his distress very far, he was too ignorant; he only felt that *unheil* crossed the threshold of the house he loved, and he could only voice his inward protest by announcing "Mr. Hadden Renshaw" with funereal solemnity.



## CHAPTER II

### WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOR?

VANDA had resumed her place in the window; once more she sat encircled by that protective arc of rosy light. She extended her arms, bare to the elbow, along the black, oaken arms of the chair, and her fingers rested upon the heads of a pair of prehistoric animals.

It was an effective setting, and she watched carefully for traces of its effect; but Renshaw, when on guard, was no mean adept himself in the art of concealing emotion. He found her and bowed to her with a deliberation that might denote self-possession, or the desire to hide his lack of it. He took the seat his host rose to offer, and altered its position sufficiently to allow of a clear view of husband and wife. The latter decided that silence must be her first cue, and Conquest, always quick to catch and act upon the lighter



varieties of intrigue, took upon himself the onus of introduction.

“Your ring at the bell, Mr. Renshaw, was singularly opportune. We were discussing, at the moment, the play you were kind enough to submit to us, and I may tell you that we are both impressed. It’s smartly written, and, what’s more, it deals with a theme which, though not precisely original, has never been handled quite in your fashion. Still, as you’re well aware, appreciation is cheap and production is confoundedly expensive.”

“A production like your last must always prove expensive,” the visitor rejoined coolly; “the public is sick of a sugar and water diet.”

“You’re fresh from Oxford I’m told.”

“I’ve taken my science degree, sir; but don’t imagine this is university ferment.”

“What? It’s individual ferment, is it? Well, we want individuality, provided it’s the right kind; but there’s only one right kind, and ninety and nine wrong. As for our sugar and water,



let me remind you that for a long time it's been swallowed without a murmur."

"For a *very* long time."

"You mean, Mr. Renshaw?"

"I mean that in twenty years many changes take place, many fashions alter, many playthings get relegated to the shelf."

"You'd relegate us to the shelf?" the elder man inquired with unimpaired good-humor.

"On the contrary, I'd take you down again."

"Uncommonly kind. But suppose I were to tell you that I've no objection to the shelf so long as it's fairly comfortable."

"But surely—surely——" the boy stammered—stopped, and his dark eye wandered towards the window.

"Surely what?"

"Surely the shelf is a derogatory place, even if it isn't actually uncomfortable."

"Oh! derogatory. They say that of the music halls. Personally I can't be bothered with these fine shades of distinction."



"The music halls," echoed his visitor, and again he stopped, again his tell-tale eye sought the window and the still figure there, giving the actor time to send a glance of his own in the same direction—the "I told you so" glance of the confirmed cynic.

"You don't approve of the 'halls'?"

"I don't approve their competing with legitimate drama."

"Competing? Bless you, there's no competition; we don't get a look in. In another ten years they'll have swamped us."

"Scandalous!" But Conquest only laughed.

"Call 'em a row of green bay-trees if you like, but that won't stop the flourishing. No, our only chance is to cave in early, to accept the olive branch of amalgamation. I'm willing enough. Fifteen minutes a night instead of three mortal hours—a profession in a nutshell, so to speak. But, alas, such a settlement isn't for the likes of us." He finished with a shrewd look at the young man's indignant face.



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"I should hope not."

"Come, Mr. Renshaw, this is prejudice."

"It's a prejudice, sir, that I think—no, I'm sure—others share with me."

For the third time his eye played truant, and the other, pressing home what he recognized for an advantage, turned to Vanda and tossed the ball lightly into her hands.

"That's true," he observed ingenuously. "You must talk to my wife; she won't allow herself to fit into the modern scheme of things; which brings us back to your drama. Frankly it's beyond me, but it seems it's not beyond her. Get her to talk; she *can* talk when she fancies it worth her while."

But for a full minute she would give him no more, in answer to his first straight look at her, than an absent and speculative smile, under which the blood in his young face began to stir.

It was—so she paused to muse luxuriously—just the face with which a wanton fancy might play indefinitely and with profit as well as pleas-



ure; lean, dark and virile, shaven and pale, now almost harsh and now quite beautiful beneath the play of moods various in all probability as her own.

The teeth were excellent, the nose nicely shaped for sticking in the air when a latent tendency to hauteur came uppermost; he was a cross—or so she decided—between the ascetic and the poet, with a liberal dash of the egoist. Her glance dropped lower to take stock of the fine steely frame—the frame of an athlete allowed to rust a little in the laboratory, but not to stoop or flop.

She approved him, and behind the approval lay the conviction that, not coincidence, but something stronger and warmer lay behind that choice of an avenue for his talents. He was a stranger to her, but she was none to him.

“I don’t believe,” she said at last, “that Mr. Renshaw needs to be told my opinions or very many of my thoughts; I think that somehow he has possessed himself of the key to, let us say,



my subjective self, and pilfered all that may be of value."

"You mean that you admit—you understand——"

"Everything," she exclaimed, the languor of her glance seeming to melt under the intensity of his. "It would be of no use to dissemble. I don't know for whom that wonderful shoe was made, but I *do* know that it fits me. Tell me where and when and how you came to write that truth stranger than any fiction? I've never seen your face before, and I know most of the faces of our *habitués*."

"I was very young when I saw you first."

"Yes?" The voice was inviting as a strain of love-music, and eagerly he responded to it, forgetful of the intruding third, forgetful of the properties of the rose-colored curtain, in the shelter of which she sat, forgetful of everything except the intoxicating fact that into her face the light was coming back as into a lamp newly lit.



“It was in such another piece as that of last night. You were smothered in gold tissue, but your eyes were tragic; they looked stormily out seeking a face that should reflect some understanding of the position. I thought, ‘surely, surely, she must find mine, even though it’s only the face of a little boy’; but you never did. I was too insignificant. Over my head you called into space for that deliverer who never came.”

“And you grew up, and you remembered, and still, still I looked over your head?” she questioned, in some real bewilderment.

“Oh, I didn’t frequent the stalls; I didn’t fancy the company there, I’d like you to understand. I’m sure you *do* understand it isn’t a case of—of——”

“Calf-love?” she prompted, with a smile void of all offense.

“Exactly. Not being a case of calf-love, distance was an advantage. I sat a long way off, and I didn’t come often to the theater. I found



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I could work up my impressions better without the introduction of too many modern ones."

"And you took them, these first impressions, to Oxford with you?"

"That was nothing. But I brought them back again."

"And carried them up, up, far from the maddening crowd, into a garret?"

"Who told you that?"

"My instinct, of course. It's only in a garret, high up under the stars, that one preserves the sense of true proportion. In rooms like this"—she shrugged eloquent disdain of her luxurious surroundings—"there's too much furniture, too little oxygen, too many flowers. So you burnt midnight oil and—I came to you. Oh, it's no good pretending she's fancy-bred, that woman of your story; she's no greater and no less than myself; she *is* myself; it's my wrongs she utters, it's my revolt she portrays; and to think—to think at the eleventh hour rescue should come, and from a stranger!"



“A stranger? Must you call me that?”  
There was reproach alongside the exultation in his bright and piercing eye.

“It’s for the last time, Hadden Renshaw.”

At that lingering utterance of his name his eyelids fell; only by momentary retreat could he hope to preserve the semblance of self-control, and over his head a glance of mutual congratulation and amusement was exchanged, for the actor, if dead to strong emotion, was still alive to material welfare, and could recognize in this impressionable youth a promising recruit to the cause at stake, if not exactly the saviour of it, that his wife was inclined to hail. It was as plain to him as to her that the champion fancied himself free of the common incentive, and that on this very ignorance Vanda could trade with profit, for well she knew when to raise a postulate and when to whisper to a man.

“I don’t need to tell you,” she resumed softly,  
“that there’s an ancient and ineradicable blood-feud between such creatures as the heroine of last



night's trumpery tale and the woman you've chosen to rescue. I don't need to tell you of my sufferings. The gold tissue, the jewels, that are put so lavishly into the shop-window, are taken from inside; it's paying Peter at the expense, not of Paul, not of Lancelot or another, but of the King—the highest."

"Then why, why didn't you call to me sooner? I sent you that play weeks ago."

To his surprise, somewhat to his consternation, for his nerves were strung high, her gravity dissolved, her face broke up into a smile; roguishly she looked past him at her husband.

"'I have a partner—Mr. Jorkins,'" she quoted, and Conquest took up the tale in his turn.

"And I a manager, to pass the responsibility on to its true source, a person, Mr. Renshaw, quite incapable of seeing apparitions in a garret. This venture of ours will entail a battle royal, but it shall be fought, and, what's more, it shall be won! You have my promise."

"There," cried Vanda joyously, "you've done



what I failed to do, nailed him to a definite decision; now we're three to one, and Lawson may tear his hair—what there is left of it—when you interview him to-morrow."

"Must I interview him?" said Hadden, with the air of a person who has dropped from a great height and marvels to find his bones intact. "I shouldn't know what to say," he went on, catching the lighter note, however, with something of relief. "He'll tell me the price of scenery and lighting, and I don't care a jot about costs. He'll be certain to want the curtain up when I want it down, and down when I want it up. Can't I explain my opinions to—to Mrs. Conquest, and can't she enforce them on this circumscribed person in charge of the stage?"

"You think he won't dare to contradict and bully her?" the actor inquired carelessly. "You don't know Lawson; it takes something more than a strong individuality to worst him. But I'll undertake to see him first—to take the edge off his objections."



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"And you must come again to-morrow," Vanda put in, "when we'll have a real business talk, with the plans all cut and dried."

"'The gods avert the omen,'" her husband put in with laughter; "cutting and drying are very much in old Lawson's line, I'm afraid."

"But he doesn't believe in Lawson," she interposed, with a return of gravity, "nor do I; nobody'll believe in Lawson this day month if the rehearsals go as I mean them to go; he'll be wiped out along with other undesirable impediments to art. We believe in magic, Adrian, understand that; we take our stand on this exhibition of it. I'm to be exposed as an old woman—think of it!—an old woman, wrinkled and ugly, threatened with disgrace and decay; then, before the public has done staring at the spectacle of me without so much as a dab of my war-paint, enter the genius, who waves his wand, and, hey presto! the old hag has disappeared, or rather, the general and quite erroneous impression of an old hag has disappeared, has been replaced by a belief quite as tre-



mendous and far more salutary than the ancient belief in witchcraft, for it brings the dead to life; all the forms that have once held vitality—Cleopatra, Medusa, Undine, Helen of Troy, Carmen, and all the rest, legendary, fictional, historical, biblical—one and all are repossessed. Wherever imagination can set a match the fire is to burn again, and there's to be no roping off, no limit, no truckling to the law; art is to out-herod Herod in its exercise of tyranny. Revolution, nothing less, is the dish we mean to set before the crowd!"

And now there had come to the lamp its full influx of light. Glowing with enthusiasm, part real and part assumed, she seemed to radiate optimism and seduction; but as the boy rose to his feet, following her own movement, she checked the impulse of his spirit of idolatry by a dramatic gesture of her white arm.

"No," she said, with a ring of appeal subtly introduced into the imperious decree, "you've come near enough for one day—too near quite to



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please my vanity. Now you must go. I want to be alone—alone with that mysterious woman, myself, and yet not quite myself, that you've discovered. You must go. I won't ring; you can find your way downstairs without Story's escort. Story doesn't love you; he's the old man who wanted to go on saying, 'Not at home.' Tomorrow, at the same time, Adrian?"

"A little earlier—say eleven thirty," Conquest replied, looking at his watch, and, with a couple of bows, not quite so satisfactory as those produced upon his entrance, the visitor took his departure.

Pausing to furl his umbrella on the doorstep, he looked with brooding eyes into the Square garden, where the trees were already thick with foliage and musical with the chatter of innumerable birds. So deep was his reverie that he failed to note the pulling-up of a hansom at the curbstone before the house, and it was only when the two ladies who had dismounted from it began to mount the steps that he became aware of



their presence. The former of the two favored him with an ingratiating smile and bow, the other with a stare too innocent to be impudent; but the young man was in no condition at the moment to draw deductions. With a mechanical movement to the left of their swinging skirts, and a mechanical lift of his hat, he passed them and turned sharp towards the West.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

AND yet these two ladies were noteworthy, each in her own way, the one by virtue of ripe age worn with an air of jaunty defiance, the other by reason of the dispassion with which she carried her extreme youth.

Mrs. Winchester was close on seventy, and for nearly forty years she had been involved in a hand-to-hand tussle with Time. Originally a blonde, she was resolved to remain a blonde to the end—to the rather bitter end. Her lashes, her complexion, her hair, her teeth, were all as good an imitation of Nature's handiwork as modern ingenuity could furnish, but to replace wasted tissues, to revitalize spent nerves, is more than even the beauty-doctor can achieve satisfactorily, and for all her efforts the lady, at close quarters, was startling rather than attractive. Her black



eyes flashed incessantly right and left or up and down; her claw-like fingers were always either on the fidget or the grab; her elaborate, white gown, with its high waist and embroidered ribands falling to the hem of the skirt her large chip-hat smothered in moss-roses and forget-me-nots, her filmy sunshade of cerulean blue, her multitude of dangling ornaments and chains, made her an object in the landscape that it was difficult to evade and that the handsome youth she had surprised upon her daughter's doorstep should have contrived the feat, caused the poor soul a pang of torment.

“May I inquire the name of the young man so singularly wanting in manners?” she asked, sailing into the drawing-room in her most impressive manner.

“Name of Renshaw, Lydie.”

Mrs. Winchester had long ago rebelled at the term *mother*, and still more energetically at that of grandmother, so to Vanda, to Vanda's daughter, to the rank and file of the family acquaintance,



she was known—and in many cases held up to ridicule—as Lydie.

“And if it’s not an impertinence to inquire further, might I know his business? Morning callers usually entail something more than small talk.”

“His business,” Adrian explained, not without malice, “will interest you; he has a virgin drama—that is, he *had* a virgin drama; it is now ours, or it will be ours in the course of the next few days.”

The old lady did precisely what was expected of her. She dropped, with an effect of utter prostration, into the most comfortable seat within reach.

“Are you quite mad?” she gasped.

“Vanda says not; for myself I’m scarcely prepared to vouch.”

“I might have guessed—I suppose I ought to have guessed,” moaned his mother-in-law; “but it seemed so little to ask of Fortune or of you, Adrian. I might have guessed my triumph of



last night would not be countenanced. From the moment of my entrance I felt myself in touch with the audience; and General Body tells me—we met him at the Stores, and I asked him in to lunch—he tells me it was the hit of the piece. I might have told him it doesn't do to make hits of this sort in other people's companies, even though the company belongs to your own daughter and her husband. If I'd known I should have played that bit of comedy very differently. The dear General says it convulsed him, literally convulsed him, but little did he dream that he was laughing at my ruin."

Her sobs increased and her granddaughter came forward, in answer to a gesture, and loosened the long chiffon strings of her hat before removing it. She performed the action with extraordinary tenderness, murmuring the while in the jeweled ear. But the old lady was not yet ready for sympathy; she had a grievance to ride, and she flashed furious eyes upon the quiet woman in the window.



“If there was policy in such an abrupt measure I should say nothing, I should smother my own feelings. But when I know that the play is to be taken off, right in the face of popular interest and approval, because some ridiculous boy has persuaded Vanda to think him a genius, I confess my indignation rises. I’m not a fool; I’m as good a judge of a love-sick idiot as anybody. Why, I passed him on the doorstep, and he was so blinded by his infatuation that he couldn’t remember even the common courtesies to which a lady is entitled—edged round my skirts as though there were germs in them. Sibyl, my glass of sherry.”

The young girl left the room, and Lydie, finding nobody else disposed to play the comforter, roused herself to put some questions.

“When do you purpose producing this unknown person’s first effort?”

“Immediately. It will go into rehearsal in a few days.”

“And its name?”



“ ‘The Sinking Ship.’ ”

“ ‘The Sinking Ship’ ! Oh, I might have guessed that too. I read the thing, and never, never have I come across anything so impossible, so depressing, so foredoomed to failure in all the years in which I’ve been before the public. Think of anybody coming from a good dinner to watch the spectacle of a dirty, worn-out old ship going down to the bottom of the sea ! ”

“ But it doesn’t go, Lydie. You can’t have read on to the end. ”

The unexpected interruption came from Sibyl standing in the doorway, with a glass balanced carefully in one hand. Her eyes were alight, her lips parted, there was a flush on her delicate cheek that had not been there before. Her father looked at her with sudden and unusual attention, and his wife looked quite as attentively at him.

“ Oh-ho ! ” said he ; “ so you’ve been dipping into my play-books ? I thought you took no stock of theater matter. ”



"It was lying on the top, and I opened it the other day. It's wonderful, it's beautiful; it isn't like the rest."

"No," he agreed absently, his eye moving with deliberation over her slight person.

"I should think it wasn't," Lydie broke in, waving off the glass of sherry with which the girl now came forward. "It's one of those neurotic effusions that a very young man in love with a middle-aged woman finds it a relief to throw off."

But Vanda was not listening to her mother's caustic accusations, she was still staring at her husband with the look of one awaiting a long-dreaded blow. The common occasion seemed to hold a kernel far from common, a kernel which the next moment would expose. Conquest, however, spoke without any consciousness of thunder in the air.

"You've put an idea into my head, Sibyl; or rather, you've reminded me of an idea lying fallow there."

"An idea about me, father?"



“ Yes. Can’t you guess it? ”

For a moment there was dead silence in the room, and it seemed to Vanda that the beat of her heart must arouse attention; but nobody looked her way.

“ I’m to go on the stage.”

There was a loud explosion of protest, but it came from Lydie.

“ Sibyl on the stage! Now I’m sure of your insanity. Why, she’s as much idea of acting as my parasol! I never heard anything so preposterous or so selfish and inconsiderate in all my life! Pray, what am I to do if she’s off at all hours studying parts she’ll never have the spirit to play? Who’s to help me with my shopping and my letters? Who’s to read to me and amuse me in my few short leisure hours? She isn’t lively, as we all know, but she’s willing and good-natured, and I can’t possibly afford to pay a companion. But, as usual, I’m not to be considered. I’m only an old woman; it doesn’t matter if I go to the wall. Oh, I ought to be accustomed to it;



but it's so hard to forget the days when my lightest whim was law, when it was thought an honor to fetch and carry for me. I try to forget, and I can't. And now to force this poor girl under the limelight to make a fool of herself! Surely, child, you must know your own limitations. What have you to say to this absurd idea?"

"It's a question," said Conquest, before she could reply, "of making the pot boil."

"Say, rather," shrieked the old lady, "it's a question of making the reviewers boil!"

"Are you afraid, Sibyl?"

"No, father, not a bit."

The disclaimer, void alike of vehemence or hesitation, only served further to inflame Lydie.

"Aren't *you* going to interfere?" she demanded, turning to her daughter. "Don't tell me you're going to countenance this nonsense!"

Vanda took time over her reply; she studied each of the three faces before her, and when she spoke her voice had a feline note often to be found in it when her faculties were most engaged.



"Why should I interfere? She'll make a pretty stage-ornament. She needn't talk, you know; few of Mr. Renshaw's women do, except the leading lady. It's for you to decide, Sibyl; we're not tyrants. You'll get flowers and trinkets and chocolate and flattery from the young gentlemen in the stalls, and it must be poor fun waiting on Lydie all day long. If you're sick of it, if you want change, now's the time to speak, and we'll fetch out the make-up box and see what we can do with you."

If she thought to discompose the girl she was to be disappointed. Sibyl seemed scarcely to hear; she was looking away, sideways, at a distant portion of the room, in a fashion Vanda knew well.

"Don't you hear me?" she said sharply. "Don't stare into vacancy in that stupid way. Do you or don't you want to go on the stage?"

"I don't want to, but I will."

"Of course you will. Where else should a daughter of ours go?" her father responded



easily. "You'll like it well enough once the ice is broken; and, if I recollect rightly, there's a part eminently fitted for a *débutante*."

Mrs. Winchester broke out into a veritable tirade, presenting relays of objection, to all of which he proffered the soft answer warranted to turn away wrath, but which, in this case, served rather to instil despair. And Vanda made no effort to join the combat; she wove the two voices into a dolorous accompaniment of her own bitter and fearful thoughts. With somber eyes she looked at the cause of the disturbance, tracing it back to the point where, frail and embryonic, it had first touched her aristocracy. Sibyl was an only child, born in the first year of marriage, when her passion had been pretty evenly divided between art and a husband. At first the baby had been welcome, as were all extravagant demands to one of her immense vitality. It flattered her pride to defy common, human weakness; it was intoxicating to brace one's faculties to the ascent of a mountain commonly labeled inaccessible. She



had served her two masters with enthusiasm, and it was not until the child began to evince traits of character very markedly her own that the mother's satisfaction became touched with doubt. She became aware that, beyond a certain point, she was unable to influence the little girl; that the eyes raised to her own seemed to pierce the glamorous surface, seeking what she was afraid to christen. The lisping tongue broke gradually into expression, but the story was not the story of her own vain preconception. Little Sibyl took her life—that undemonstrative life her mother strove to call insignificant—from a source outside the dominion of the spoilt and brilliant actress.

Nor was this the only crumpled rose-leaf in the luxurious couch. Her mother, left almost without resources, had for the last dozen years chosen to seek shelter both in the theater and in the house of her son-in-law. She had weathered a couple of marriages, divorce and widowhood; money and fame had flown through her fingers and



away; she had, like too many of her happy-go-lucky order, made no provision for the rainy day. A good deal sadder, and perhaps a trifle wiser, she foisted herself upon Vanda, then in the glad possession of just such a reputation as she herself had enjoyed and dissipated. With characteristic Bohemian good-nature she had been taken in, but the protest, outwardly suppressed, burned fiercely within the daughter's heart.

It was indeed something more than a protest, for it seemed to her that, as the years passed, bringing decrease of life to her mother, increase to her child, she, Vanda, became more and more securely trapped between the devil and the deep sea; offspring to the one, creatress of the other, she saw herself captive in a half-way prison house whose single door of exit she dared not even permit herself to examine very closely. Mrs. Winchester stood for that dread bourne from which no traveler returns. In the pleasure-seeking, self-sodden old woman, at once immoral and ridiculous, she could not fail to recognize the natural



end to those very ambitions that engrossed herself; while, in the young girl, who stood so aloof from the influence of the house in which her life had been spent, she saw the deep sea of a condition she was unable to fathom and afraid to exploit. And now, for the first time, the fine, careless eye of her husband was at attention; he too, it would seem, had detected secret possibilities in the silent and simple girl; he purposed to draw her out from her quiet corner and put the authenticity of that subdued claim to value to the test. Out of vague surmise, out of the friendly shadow of still unproven things, the enemy was about to be invoked, and by the one person who had stood to her imagination in a rôle other than subservient. Once more she became aware of what was being said—aware that Adrian, as usual, had worked his will, and with the minimum amount of effort.

With the manuscript of the new play under his arm he was about to leave the room, but Lydie, with a last desperate burst of opposition, inter-



cepted him and laid forcible hands on the bone of contention.

“You’re not to take it away till I’ve had another look at it. As far as I could tell there was nothing, positively nothing, to suit me; but I fancy two or three of the minor parts could be cut out and their best lines given to the Marchioness of something or other. You must arrange an early interview for me with this young man. There’s one advantage about a novice and one only—he’s grateful to people of experience for hints and corrections.”

But Conquest held tight to the book and to certain opinions and intentions of his own.

“If I’m not much mistaken this beginner will be arbitrary; we shall have a job getting him to consider the question of alteration; and I’m not going to yield him to your tender mercies, Lydie. You won’t attend to Sibyl’s interests, and it’s these I want considered a little more. We can’t allow her to make her *début* in quite so tame a fashion as does his *ingénue*. Allow me.”



Deftly he freed the manuscript, nodded to his wife, and took his departure quite unmoved by Lydie's shriek of rage. Vanda, equally unmoved it would appear, drew a tall work-frame within reach and began to set stitches in an elaborate length of embroidery; on Sibyl, therefore, fell the task of consolation. She supported the old lady back to her comfortable chair; she presented, for the second time, the glass of sherry, and had the satisfaction of seeing it drained to the last drop; she listened patiently to a lecture on the selfishness of men in general and relatives in particular, and, when the influence of the wine began to work, when violence began to lose some of its impetus, she was quick to introduce ideas calculated, as she knew by experience, to turn the volatile mind of her patient.

It was exactly like comforting a fractious child, for it was the opening of the parcels purchased that morning that eventually succeeded in restoring calm; and presently Lydie was happily employed in discussing what should be done with



lengths of flowered ribbon and scraps of lace; in trying the effect of two or three spangled hair-ornaments—taken on approval—against her corn-colored head; in sampling French sweetmeats and various kinds of perfume; then, recollecting that the General (on whom she had definite and rather desperate matrimonial designs) was expected for lunch, she rang for the maid, shared by Vanda and herself, and rustled away to undergo a very necessary course of alterations and repairs.

The room was very quiet after her departure. Sibyl took her father's chair and, cheek on hand, appeared to lapse into a reverie. The sunlight, striking through the window to the right of Vanda's shaded one, played over the face, revealing the purity of the skin, the healthy flow of the blood behind—a flow that, to the watchful woman opposite, was connected with occult power, for it seemed to move in curious disconnection with the ordinary influences of humanity, in curious obedience to some inward and quite



incalculable word of command. This chill and still creature, whose very name, chosen by a wanton fancy, seemed to fit her with supernatural accuracy, had her own law of being, and no wave of passion from the outside world had as yet, to the mother's knowledge, contrived to disturb it. It was the face of a child, but the child who stares her elders out of countenance, the child who doles out embarrassment and never accepts it. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, she resembled physically the father rather than the mother, but this resemblance was repudiated by expression. Where his lines spoke of suavity, hers spoke of innocence; the upper lip, rising a trifle in the middle to expose the short white teeth set just a degree too far apart, suggested pliancy of a very different type from his; the brown eyes, cut like his on the downward slope, were warm with a tenderness very much their own, and had long stood, to Vanda's imagination, as a central cause for disquietude.

Some day, she told herself, this gentle minister



to her creature wants would turn and rend her, would substantiate this hidden claim to power. She was not normal; she was not safe.

“ Sibyl,” she said, when she could bear the impress of suspense no longer, “ Sibyl, what are you thinking about? ”

“ About Mr. Renshaw, mother.”

Here was fuel of an unexpected kind upon the fire of the other's apprehension.

“ What about him? ” she asked with jealous asperity. “ You've never seen him.”

“ Yes, I saw him to-day on the steps.”

“ He didn't see you, according to Lydie.”

“ Of course not; why should he? He was looking miles away. I didn't want him to see us.”

“ Why not, pray? ”

“ We don't belong to his dreams.”

“ Oh,” said Vanda uncertainly, “ then you've drawn up a schedule of his possible dreams, have you? I hope it's accurate; I hope it takes into account the main one—the dream of Royalties.



I'm afraid you're romantic, Sibyl," she added, seeing that the girl intended no reply. "This young man is hunting fortune, like the rest of us, but he's chosen a spot not too overrun with other treasure-seekers; he fancies there's a cargo on this old boat—ivory and apes, peacocks and what-not, queer stuff that might be marketable if handled wisely. He's not a philanthropist; he's a dramatist."

"He saves her, mother."

"And you're pleased? Now I wonder why. It isn't natural you should want her saved, Sibyl. Your interest should be with the new boats, all fresh paint and flags and music, dancing out to sea in divine ignorance of what's in store. You're young; you belong to the other side. What are you doing playing traitor to your natural tendencies?" The questions were momentous. The speaker's heart beat rapidly; she pushed her work aside; and her nervous mind was already hunting ways of retreat should response prove alarming.

"Mr. Renshaw is young too."



"Ah, but that's different."

"Why is it different?"

"He's a man, and a man," she added, with a cautious eye on her audience, "can afford to experiment; he can afford to spend a year or two in foreign travel before he settles down. I'm a foreign land, you know, Sibyl, and he thinks there's amusement as well as profit in exploring me."

"Do you mean he's a humbug, mother?"

"I mean he's a business man; we're all business people; you'll be a business woman in a very short space of time. You'll see what I mean when you get into the theater."

"But I've been in the theater often, and I don't see it that way."

"Because you were always in front of the foot-lights. I used to stick you in a box sometimes just for the fun of watching you laugh and cry at the wrong places."

"But I didn't," said the girl with resolution.

"I cried when you were unhappy. It was the



others who laughed; they never seemed to understand. You said funny things, yet your eyes were like prisoners; they seemed to call to me, 'I can't get out—I can't get out.' ”

But Vanda was already in swift retreat.

“ You dear, queer, little soul, you always see everything upside down. But if we chatter here any longer I shall be late for lunch. There's a pack of people coming; goodness knows who I didn't ask last night in the excitement; and as for Lydie, she entertains Tom, Dick and Harry every day at my expense. What about to-morrow, Sibyl? ”

“ Nobody coming that I know of, mother.”

“ That's all right. I don't want a crowd. I'm keeping young Renshaw, and I can't talk business with Lydie thrusting in her oar. Get her to go somewhere, darling. Drop the General a hint; he's fairly keen, isn't he? ”

“ I think so.”

The voice was apathetic, but the elder woman paid no attention.



“Then it can easily be managed. Don’t bring her back till dinner time. Get him to take her for a run in his motor after lunch; it’s a new toy, so he’ll be more than willing. I’ll dispose of Adrian if he hasn’t already disposed of himself. Lunch for two—only two, mind—and make it good. Champagne—no—the best claret, and liqueurs with our coffee. And now run and tell Lydie I must have Elaine for ten minutes. If she won’t give her up you’ll have to do my hair; but I never look the same. You’re neat, dearest, but you’re not artistic, so use all your arts of persuasion to capture that French minx.”

Humming gaily she entered the big, luxurious bedroom, looking idly from one of its many mirrors to another to catch stray scraps of her own elegant reflection. Pleasant recollections began once more to surge uppermost, among them the face of her young visitor, the echo of his voice as he said, “I was very young when I saw you first.” He was very young still, but he didn’t know it; he should be carefully protected from the



knowledge, and from all knowledge likely to interfere with this most opportune desire to stand between herself and public assault. He should sit, where he had begged to sit, at the helm of her pleasure-boat, and surely, surely, it would then be safe to drop back once more upon the cushions, look up into an unclouded sky, dream the old dreams of ascendancy. Surely the pressure of her years and fears was slackening, slipping; at all events, the blues were over for that day, and when Elaine came in with a glib and eminently French promise to make of Madame "a Dream," Madame lent herself to the experiment with the joyous abandonment of a child.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCESSION

237 King's Road, Chelsea, is not a particularly desirable place of residence from the Sybarite point of view, but to Hadden Renshaw it possessed the charm of the unfamiliar. His lines had been too uniformly laid in pleasant places to satisfy a temperament that his friends were content to call mercurial and his enemies unstable.

The only child of a city magnate and a woman of quality (fashionable quality be it of course understood), he had early jumped to the conclusion that his freedom of spirit was likely to be cramped by convention and had issued a first declaration of independence when still in his teens. For a time his people and his world generally were disposed to find cause for complacency as well as diversion in this attitude, and the boy went to Oxford with his youthful sense of im-



portance well inflated, but, entering boldly into the fields of debate there, he found himself face to face with a very different form of opposition from that encountered in his mother's drawing-room. Neither a precocious intellect nor a fine command of language served to protect him from the missiles of less polished but more genuine would-be reformers, and, pricked this way and that by their pitiless argument, he was very shortly driven out of his comfortable self-estimate and forced to prove his vaunted claim to distinction at a stiff price. But there was a love of drama, if not of actual melodrama, in his blood, and it was inevitable that such a hostage of his good faith as he should eventually produce should savor somewhat of the footlights.

The dust and the patronage of Mayfair was therefore shaken off at a large dinner given by his parents in honor of his twenty-third birthday and his triumphant capture of a "First" in science. The occasion was certainly tempting. His father, toasting him pompously from the head



of the table, dilated on his future with unction; his mother was inclined to dilate rather garrulously on his past, and when he rose to respond the young man was heated both by wine and contempt. But his education had at least taught him to present denunciation and rebellion in the form satiric, and it took the company some time to realize the nature of the bomb-shell he was launching in their midst. By slow degrees he descended towards the realm of candor, and, as he did so, he had the satisfaction of seeing the flash of a knife here and there; enlightenment was waking, opposition would follow, and there rose in him the joy of the revolutionist. He was not to have it all his own way, so it transpired. There were men at his father's table accustomed to face a stormy board meeting, there were scholars who could turn an epigram into a whip quite as effectively as Hadden himself, and apply it in some cases with more weight. The convivial company, rousing itself from torpor, proceeded to punish, as it deserved, this unexpected and treach-



erous assault upon the sacred rights of its most holy order. Elderly gentlemen found considerable satisfaction in hitting back—once their blood was up—in lashing juvenile presumption, in exposing the flaws common to all forms of extremism, whether it went by the name of “reform” or no—in short, in making, by dint of judicious amalgamation, a fool of the young enthusiast and a halter of his logic; they took out of his mouth that final declaration of immunity from the laws of fashion with which he had purposed to wind up, and, referring instead to those of decency and gratitude, they contrived that the edicts of excommunication should be pronounced by themselves. To be sure Mrs. Renshaw and a few of her friends damped the victory by the production of pocket-handkerchiefs; to be sure the actual “kicking-out” was robbed of much of its barbarity by the introduction of cigars and the voice of the compromiser—that tender and watchful guardian of the interests of society, without whose presence no gathering of the clans of the



Upper Ten is ever considered complete or safe; still, it was scarcely in the way prescribed by his imagination that Hadden severed, temporarily, his connection with the parental house, and it was scarcely as the typical martyr that he mounted the many flights of uncarpeted stairway leading to the attic of his ultimate selection.

But, once established under the sloping roof, atmosphere began to act. Penury never bit deep enough to be painful, and, free from debt, in possession of fifty pounds (the residue of a small legacy), he was much in the position of the man who runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds. To begin with, there was the novel job of trying to turn this bare top-floor into some semblance of a home. The outgoing tenant had left a piece of scaffolding, which, after consideration, he understood to represent a partition between bed and sitting-room. With innumerable yards of chintz he set to work covering the ugly skeleton, and the sound of his hammer and his occasional expletives eventually brought to his



assistance a neighbor from the attic opposite—a German of his own age and sex, fair of skin and shabby of attire. Kurt Sommer, so it soon transpired, earned a living—a very bare living—by means of his flute, which he played nightly in an East-end orchestra, but, like many of the Teuton temperament, he was an optimist. That a friendship should be struck up between himself and the young Englishman was a matter of course, and, quite indifferent to the latter's layer of reserve, he proffered eagerly all the assistance in his power; and as he worked he talked, and always of the artist life—of its brief winter of hardship, of its long, sweet summer of temperament, until Hadden was fast in the toils of his disarming confidence and radical amiability, not to mention a more mundane cause for surrender, viz. the fact that Kurt was an excellent cook, with a positive genius for making soup out of a sausage-skewer—a talent that left Renshaw free to pursue his literary activities undisturbed by the protest of the neglected flesh.



He had, however, some sort of a bump of organization. So many hours were measured off for exercise, so many for recreation, so many for pot-boiling, for, if he couldn't cook the day's rations, it was but fair he should supply the material for them. And the task of invading Fleet Street with his lighter wares became a quite exhilarating, if not always a profitable, one; he found a positive pleasure in worsting the office-boy or any other guardian of the sacred portals, in forcing an interview, by fair means or foul, with some busy publisher, in exercising those dear powers of rhetoric to induce the gentleman to accept an article illustrative of a prevalent social abuse; and it seemed to him that the practical demands of the day created for the siren who inspired the night precisely the atmosphere that her divinity required. By the light of contrast she shone resplendent; by virtue of incongruity she took transcendental beauty, and his refusal to harbor a thought of her during the daytime lent to his surrender, when its hour struck, a sense



of hallowed intensity. Like some fair sleep-walker she came to him with hands outspread the moment that the lamp was lit, the cheap curtain drawn, the flutist gone to his evening's work; and she was a goddess threatened. Over her head he saw—had long seen—the sword of what is impiously called advance, and it was to him she turned for reinstatement. Dreams of childhood, fancies of adolescence were beginning to blossom again in the air of this high chamber. The obstructions of thought born of too lavish feeding, of too large and too subservient a circle of friends, were removed, and a point that had flashed in and out of his consciousness for many years, like a light in a revolving lighthouse, became permanently visible. For six months he worked at the great drama that was to revolutionize popular opinion, from eight in the evening till two and sometimes three in the morning, and Hadden Renshaw was to graduate young in the schools of opportunity. It was written in the Book of Fortune that he was to endure but a few weeks of



suspense; he was to be turned back but a paltry half-dozen times from the doorstep of the woman to whom his manuscript had been dispatched—the woman he had for long elected to honor with what he fondly called a purely abstract passion of appreciation.

But if he still clung to the term, he was growing daily more uncomfortably conscious of its insufficiency, of nerves behind it threatening his complacency and his self-esteem, and as he sat, pen in hand, on this particular evening in early May, and frowned down at the manuscript upon his desk, it was plain that indecision had her talons out. The sheets before him were liberally marked with corrections in blue pencil, with erasures and insertions, with crosses and notes of interrogation. There were galling memories behind each, memories of defeat, of weakness. Up to a point he had carried all before him, both with Conquest and the manager, but at that point his resolution had been headed off and gradually worsted. Sibyl's part was to be strengthened,



more light was to be thrown on the pretty *débutante*, no matter at whose expense. He had fought the ultimatum with ever-decreasing zeal, for fear had entered into his opposition and undermined his confidence; he had come too close to that abstract passion of his.

He dared not risk provoking the threat of rejection he had seen, more than once, in the actor's eye. To hedge was derogatory, but to give the enemy an opportunity for retraction was, he found, impossible. As decorously as he could he had himself retreated, and now he sat facing the question of how far that retreat might be made to pander to the shreds of his pride; how far could his ingenuity cover it? With his mouth curled into an ironic and unpleasant smile, he set to work, glancing up at intervals to extricate, from the many shapes hurrying across the region of his brain, the one best suited to his rather ignoble purpose.

Presumably he found some species of inspiration, for after about half an hour he laid down the



pen with a sigh indicative of tempered satisfaction. At the same moment his quick ear caught the sound of tapping, then of an opening door and the hum of voices, and presently Kurt put in a shock head of hair to whisper, with a quite ludicrous amount of caution—"A lady!"

"A lady?" said the other blankly. "For you or me?"

"For you, my friend, assuredly. I receive no ladies."

"Nor I. What's she like?" he added with suspicion.

"Beautiful—oh! so beautiful," sighed the susceptible German, with an eloquent lift of his slender hands.

"Then what the devil do you mean by leaving her on the doorstep? Beautiful? It isn't—it couldn't be——" He rose to his feet, red beneath a thrilling suspicion. "Tall?" he queried breathlessly; "a voice like the sound of water; marvelous hair—red, gold, copper——"

"Ze light is bad," his friend replied; "but, yes,



ze voice is as zat of my flute. You know ze lady? I ask her in?"

"Idiot!—of course—but no, I'll do it myself."

He pushed into the passage and on to the door of Kurt's room, at which the visitor stood, but before he reached her he was aware that his presumptuous notion had been punished as it deserved. She was tall, but there was no majesty in her bearing; she was one of those reedy girls one sees by the score in society and elsewhere. Her voice was musical, but it was soprano, it lacked the deep note of the one that had struck so poignantly upon his heart.

"May I speak to Mr. Renshaw?" she began. Then peering forward, for the light was very dim—"It *is* Mr. Renshaw. May I come in? I won't keep you long. I'm Sibyl Conquest, and I've a favor to ask of you."

"This way, please." He spoke curtly, for when his vanity got a rap his manners were apt to suffer to some extent. And she provided him with more than disappointment; she embodied a



definite and dangerous grievance; her appearance was another touch upon the raw, for her favor could only be concerned with the question that had tormented him—the question to which he had already succumbed.

“There are two steps, and this is my friend Mr. Sommer. No, don’t go, Kurt; I’m quite sure Miss Conquest has nothing to say to me of a private nature. We haven’t even had the pleasure of an introduction,” he added, setting a chair for her under the window, “though I’m looking forward to meeting you at the first rehearsal next week. And the favor?”

He spoke with a smile, with a lift of rather quizzical eyebrows. He was far from satisfied with her method of entrance—her quiet scrutiny of himself, his companion, and the room, with her composed settlement of herself in the seat of his selection, full in such light as the room possessed.

“I’m sorry to bustle you,” he added, a trifle impatiently. “I won’t say my time’s valuable, but



may I remind you that it isn't quite my own just now."

She followed his glance in leisurely fashion, and found the desk, the manuscript, the pen

"That's what I came about."

"Then I'm afraid you come too late; all the alteration I think desirable has been done already."



## CHAPTER V

### WALKING IN THE DARK

HER "oh" of unqualified consternation was however reassuring, and with zest, as well as patronage, he began to explain the rights of the artist.

"You see, Miss Conquest, we are not justified in sacrificing a big cause to—forgive my bluntness—a small person. Your first appearance looms very large, naturally, in your own sight, but my drama and its success looms in mine, and it's impossible, simply impossible, to allow a minor character like yours too much attention. I've done what I can, rather grudgingly I'm afraid; but I've conceded something. I've run you in a dozen extra speeches, all apt and pretty, and I've strengthened your entrance; more I can't and I won't do for you."

"Why did you do so much?"



“It isn’t much,” he stammered in perplexity, “and—and your father insisted.”

“Why did you listen to him?”

“When a popular manager condescends to argue with an unknown playwright, it’s customary, I find, for the latter to listen.”

“Customary—yes.”

It was Kurt who broke the tension. Kurt, standing shyly back in the far distance of the room, his back against the wall, his round eyes of china blue fixed attentively upon the visitor.

“Ach!” he cried with exultation, “you are clever, my friend, but you do not yet understand all. You do not understand the reason of the visit of Miss here. To me it comes. She is as myself; she is content to play ze flute; zat is ze accompaniment. She desires not to stand in ze front of ze stage; she desires not zat you alter ze parts; she wishes zat you keep ze big idea; zat is ze favor. Is it not so? Have I right?”

She laughed, a pleased child’s laugh of agreement; but Hadden frowned, vexed to have his



case summed up against him in such unexpected fashion by such a youthful and ignorant pair.

"If that's the case," he said stiffly, "I presume I can remove those new additions to your part and rely on you to explain the matter to your father?"

"Of course you can," she answered, meeting his look of malice frankly. "Father is the easiest person in the world to manage."

"I didn't find him so."

"No, because——" she began and stopped.

"Because?" he urged with curiosity.

"Because you were not sure of yourself."

"Not sure of myself? Few people are much surer. Ask my friends, ask my family; they know, to their cost, how far my convictions are prepared to go, and have gone."

"You mean," she said with disconcerting simplicity, "that you shook them all off to come here?"

"And you mean, I suppose, that the candle is



in too small a ratio to the game to be worth consideration or respect."

"Don't," she begged with more laughter; "you make my head spin when you tie a saying up into a knot like that. What I mean is, this room would please me well enough."

For the second time it was the young German who came to the rescue of the situation.

"It is an excellent lodging—yes," he observed with judicial gravity. "It is near ze town; it is cheap; we are content zat we acquire it."

"It's quiet," Hadden put in with what dignity he could summon. "I took it on that account. I can give myself up to my art here without fear of disturbance, and that's all that signifies."

"Your art," she repeated softly. "And what is art, Mr. Renshaw?"

"You might as well say with Pilate, 'What is truth?' The question is rather wide."

"But if you give up so much to art," she persisted, "you must have a good idea of its value. You could tell me, anyway, when you began to



love, and why; and what the goddess gives you, and what you give to her."

"I could, but—the answer might go outside the range of your education."

She evinced no indignation at this rude repulse.

"I'm not clever, but I'm always ready to learn," she said with a simplicity he was beginning to suspect.

"What does art give me?" he repeated, with his anger on the swell. "Nothing of your satisfied air, nothing of your even temper. She doesn't always allow me foothold for my dignity, but she gives me the hobby of creation. On such a night as this, still, soft and windless, I open the window behind you and, believe me or not, as you please, men and women come trooping in at it in such numbers that I have to employ the art of selection with some judgment; for every friend of the flesh I've renounced there are a hundred of these spirit companions all imploring embodiment. Is it nothing to be permitted to con-



struct human creatures out of what convention is content to call empty air?"

"Human creatures! That means a being with a body and a soul."

"It does," he agreed tartly, for in her voice, in her speculative eye, he recognized an accusation.

"And with me the order is reversed—the soul comes first; these beings are created from the inside. Their bodily shapes are of minor consequence; I leave to the doll merchant the task of tinting and molding and dressing. I'm death on dolls, Miss Conquest, in case you haven't discovered the fact; they're to me much what cats are to the garden maniac; I spend a considerable amount of my time trying to exterminate them and their detestable tracks; only, unfortunately, their name is legion; they spring up by the thousand, thanks to the vitiated taste of the day. You must forgive me if I become a trifle personal, if I tell you that, in my opinion, these same dolls are under your father's patronage, and that you yourself—though you evince such a generous



readiness to stand on one side—are not exempt from doll tendency.”

It was the unblinking scrutiny to which she submitted him that provoked his passion; it was his inward distress that drove him on towards a yet more violent outburst.

“The fact is you haven’t grasped the magnitude of your own offer. You’ve had such a long day of it that it’s not surprising you should fail to recognize the threat of dissolution, for it’s dissolution I’m aiming at, Miss Sibyl. If I make my point you go out and your place knows you no more; you go out, you and your curls and your simper and your whole illegal armory of fancy weapons, and not even the old dodderer in the stalls will have the spirit to call you back again. You’ve only held the position so long by virtue of hypnotism, and once the spell is broken, once you become visible in all your naked insipidity, the game is over.”

“If it’s such a poor game, so much the better then,” she remarked. “But have you told me



all? You've told me what you want to tear down, but what are you going to put up?"

"A true figure of art. A figure with blood and hot water in its veins."

"The figure of my mother," she said, with calm eyes upon his consternation.

"Well, why not?" he demanded, rallying his forces to the protection of dignity. "Doesn't every abstract question require a material peg on which to expose itself to a material public? Does it minimize the grandeur or the value of an idea to give it a human name?"

"No. That's why I asked you for a name. I want to understand."

"Then you *shall* understand, and if the knowledge hurts you, remember you've only yourself to blame; one can't explore a Bluebeard's chamber and evade the consequence."

He left his place and crossed to the mantelpiece. The room by this time was nearly dark and he lit a candle, with a hand that trembled either from nervousness or anger. Returning, he held



it to the wall, and Sibyl, bending forward, saw that he had illumined a panel portrait. She knew it well. It represented the Vanda of a dozen years ago, dressed, or rather swathed, in filmy, Eastern draperies. For a few all too short weeks she had persuaded her husband to produce a sensuous drama out of the time of Pharaoh, and though the public had not shown itself cordial to this deviation from the common track, the actress herself had reveled in the barbaric nature of the passions she was permitted to exploit.

She leaned against a marble column, one arm raised, the head thrown back to reveal the famous line running from chin to shoulder. The attitude was indicative of despair, but, looking closer, one found a narrow strip of light under the half-closed eyelid; emotions savage and baneful burned there; beneath the rigidity of the limbs one began to suspect taut muscles biding their moment of mutiny.

The girl looked earnestly first at the picture, then at the face of the young man, and, as earnestly,



the German from his far corner looked at her. Over the lower part of her face and over her form the light of the candle flickered, but on the upper part there lay the remnants of the daylight, and to the mind of the silent watcher (a mind restricted in many directions but abnormally developed in a few) it seemed that pity, like a faint but luminous vapor, was emanating; it seemed to him, moreover, that his friend's utterances, held so long in reverence, were now striking the air ineffectively, that each fell short of the target at which it aimed.

"You shall understand," he said again, "first of all, a difference in opinion. To you she's what? A woman of forty? A mother? A successful actress, though not quite as successful, let us add, as others one could name? She's to be admired, of course, but with reservation; she's fascinating, but fascination isn't quite a proper quality. To your stay-at-home, 'arrange the flowers' type of temperament she's a disturbing element; to me she's a life-problem—do you hear?



a life-problem. I work it out alone, with no more than an occasional glance through an opera-glass to verify intuition; I follow the line theoretical, and meantime she, also in solitude, in the most cruel and utter solitude, follows the line executive, and we reach the same conclusion. I take her my fancy-bred woman and she slips into the skin. It's a fit not to be repudiated. I told you my work was from the inside. I detect and imprison the soul in definite expression; she clothes it with a body. The figure began where everything of consequence begins, in misty thought, in vaporous speculation, but it ends in granite. She is established, or she will be, before many weeks are over." His opposition had gone, only his exultation remained. "She's been chained a long time; she'll be stiff, maybe, in a joint or two, but it will wear off. Sommer—Miss Conquest"—he flashed a triumphant look at each—"you're outside the fairy ring, but you'll be forced to come in along with that circle of skeptics on the great night. It won't be a question of in-



fluencing a majority; we shan't give tongue in any particular school of idea. It's a world language in which we're going to hold forth; a language we used to talk—we've only half-forgotten. Oh, you may laugh, you may talk of madness, genius—what you please; but, I tell you, I swear to you, you'll live to see the charm work, you'll see her reinstated, see her acknowledged for what she is—a woman capable of transmutation into any and every form in harmony with pure vitality. She's no Eastern witch, no Western hot-house product; she's solely and simply the complete and natural woman free to give expression to every phase of art."

Aware for the first time that his rhetoric had somehow failed of its effect, he turned to look from one to the other of his audience.

"Is it jealousy?" he said, in a very different tone, "or is it ignorance, or merely the deafness of a certain temperament to a certain style of appeal?"

"I must go," said Sibyl vaguely, and Kurt



Sommer hurried forward to take the guttering candle from his friend.

"I light you out," he said eagerly. "I take you to your home?" But she shook her head, looking still at the other man with that peculiar and now quite unmistakable expression of pity.

"No; I go everywhere by myself, and nobody worries me."

"Like the confiding maiden in the Irish ballad," Hadden observed; but she only smiled at the sarcasm and offered him her hand.

In the passage she again refused escort even to the foot of the dark and steep stairway.

"I can walk in the dark," she declared with a touch of gaiety. "I'm like a cat, I feel more than I see." And, true to the boast, she ran down the many flights of steps at a pace that brought the German's heart into his mouth. As the outer door clanged harshly behind her he uttered a sigh of mingled relief and sentiment.

"She is not as others," he said aloud as he turned to go back into the sitting-room.



“No; an Undine impressive by dint of negation. Have you never put your ear to a sea-shell, Kurt?”

“Assuredly; it preserves ze song of ze sea—unchangeable, all-knowing; ze emptiness exist in mortal mind alone. Surely you understand, my friend—you who dive into ze secrets of ze underworld.”

But Hadden laughed. “You’re an incorrigible sentimentalist. She’s a pretty girl, and so, by your reasoning, she’s a wise girl and a good girl and the only girl, until another comes along to put her out of your mind. But she’s an unambitious girl, and that’s all to concern me. The manuscript is intact, and I’ve made my point after all.”

“You mean she gives you your point.” But Renshaw drowned the unpalatable reminder by whistling a passage from the “The Merry Wives”—one that his musical companion had given him all too good cause to remember.



## CHAPTER VI

### TRICKS OF THE TRADE

RENSHAW'S prejudices had to suffer much during the progress of rehearsal. True, the play was read at the first meeting by Vanda herself in a manner more than adequate, but at the second assembling of the company, for what was called "comparing of the parts"—when each character was taken by its projected exponent and cues were verified—the young idealist was far from satisfied.

The stage was ill-lit, dirty and distinctly depressing; no scenic effects were even alluded to, no grouping of figures discussed, and the only point that stood out was the discontent and animosity of the general company, who saw themselves let in for a course of hard work without the faintest promise of making an individual bid for



popularity. And Bohemia in her morning toilet was an outrage to his taste; he resented the paint, the powder and the freedom of language as personal affronts; but Vanda had forecast some such a situation and had taken precautions for her own personal safety. It was at her command that the place of operation was kept in a dim light, and she chose her seat in it with circumspection. With the most aggressively artificial woman in the cast on one side and the most dissipated and pallid man in it on the other, her carefully colored face showed up picturesquely, if not with its full glow of brilliancy. Thus carefully she extracted the sting of a first doubt from his mind, and it was not until the third act was well in progress that she saw another and a more serious threat leveled against her aristocracy.

It came from the quarter least understood and most feared, from the mouth of Sibyl, and it actually threatened into the bargain one of the author's most cherished issues. The young girl of the drama, emblem of insipidity, was failing to



play the foil. In a fashion difficult to recognize, and still more difficult to resent, she was turning the points of those swift and sharp arrows with which the heroine had been so lavishly supplied. There was no question of the fact, the atmosphere was charged with attention instead of *ennui*, the company was sitting up in all senses of the term; but Vanda proved herself, as usual, capable of dealing with an emergency. She alone betrayed no trace of surprise or dismay. With patience and with patronage she set to work, patiently explaining to the novice what tricks must be avoided in the production of a work of art.

“It’s partly a question of inflection, dear. You haven’t grasped the importance of keeping the voice raised. In those simple responses of yours there should be no rise and fall; it’s disturbing and out of place; it prevents the audience from attending to the main point. Say those last lines again.” But again that peculiar note of independence sounded, though not quite so noticeably, and again the woman of experience tackled it.



“You’re not concentrating your mind on the part, Sibyl; you’re thinking of other things that have nothing to do with our work. This isn’t fair; and you’re looking about, you’re looking sideways instead of straight at me; it’s a trick of yours, and of course it doesn’t matter in private life, though it’s rather silly, but it matters very much in this instance; it’s a furtive look, as though you had a friend round the corner. I know it’s only due to nervousness; but it’s ugly and it disturbs again. Now try once more, dearest. I’m sure you don’t want to spoil Mr. Renshaw’s story.”

Slowly but relentlessly the strange rebellion was suppressed. The phrases were repeated time after time until all trace of suggestion, other than that required, had been eliminated, and nothing could be heard save the sweet, cheap tootle of an instrument of accompaniment. The audience began to breathe again, to yawn, to whisper, and Vanda, like a general in comfortable control of a situation, began to use her big guns with renewed



gusto. And she had the tact to ask nothing, apparently, of the young man's approval. The rehearsal over, she turned to the manager and embarked upon a discussion as to stage arrangement, for all the world as though his lively sense of importance were non-existent.

Seeing the common enemy temporarily abandoned, the company swooped down on him, and, after a brief skirmish, he was captured and driven into a corner by the most experienced campaigner of the lot.

"At last," said Mrs. Winchester coquettishly, "at last we get our little talk together. We ought to have had it long ago; but my dear Adrian is so obstinate and my dearest Vanda so self-centered, and the darling pair of them so blind to their own ultimate advantage. But better late than never. That part of mine, Mr. Renshaw—no, it must be Hadden, I think; time's so short, isn't it, and art so long and ceremony so altogether superfluous? That quite ridiculous part of mine can't stand as it is, you will be the first to



agree, I feel sure, now that you've heard me in it," she finished with insinuation.

"What's the matter with it?" he demanded.

"The matter? Everything's the matter, or rather nothing's the matter, to be paradoxical."

"It would be nothing in other hands," he allowed diplomatically. But the lady, though she bridled, was not to be diverted from her wrongs.

"You're going to quote Dundreary; but he had the whiskers to give him an impetus. I must have something more than straw if I'm to make bricks for the building of your reputation. There are a hundred tricks of the trade we might produce to make me more vital."

"But I don't want you more vital," he objected with growing anxiety.

"Ah, people have been telling tales, but they're not true, I assure you. I've been labeled dangerous, but I give you my word of honor, Hadden, not to interfere with your main subject; just a few telling, comedy lines, just a little relief from that rather somber theme of yours. You can



trust me, indeed you can, not to carry sympathy too far from your leading lady."

"But that's the difficulty, Mrs. Winchester; I can't."

Again she bridled, bringing her lurid visage very near his own.

"I might as well be in the auditorium for all the use you've made of me. And I've a following; it may not be quite as large as it once was, but it's still large enough to count. In certain military circles"—she paused to betray girlish embarrassment—"there will be disappointment, a fracas possibly, if you don't make some attempt to employ my talents fairly. It would be a pity, at this early stage of your career, to make enemies, to outrage the feelings of a clique accustomed to enjoy my sallies."

"But I can't introduce a lover, if that's what you want; he'd be out of focus, Mrs. Winchester. There's no room for you to sally, no time either; as it is I shall have a job to expose my full canvas in something less than a three-hour limit. If



I started letting all the minor characters fool we shouldn't be through by midnight."

"There's no occasion for the minor characters to be even considered," she retorted angrily. "I never take a minor character, at least it's never minor long after I've put my wits to work on it; and as for fooling, I dislike it even more than you do. There's a great difference between farce and comedy. Still, if you persist in keeping the play serious, I submit; make me as serious as you please, make me a positively tragic figure if you like."

It struck him nature had done this already, but he checked the smile rising to his lips and listened politely to the remainder of her suggestions.

"All I ask is for suitable employment, and if you'll allow me to say so, there's ample room still in your play. The girl Winifred is exaggeratedly stupid, the other woman is preposterously subtle. Why not make of me the happy medium? why not use me as a connecting link between these two female excesses?" He could only think for the



moment of Darwin's missing link, so grotesque did she look at these close quarters.

"Well," she said impatiently.

"I don't want my effect of contrast diminished."

"Then turn that odious Driver woman out," she snapped, "and run her lines into my part. I'll square the matter with Adrian."

"Look at the Driver woman's eye," he fenced with that lightness he could muster. "My life wouldn't be worth an hour's purchase if I connived at such an arrangement."

"Please understand, Mr. Renshaw, that I'm talking seriously."

"So am I."

"And you positively refuse to listen to any of my suggestions."

"They come too late."

Mrs. Winchester closed her eyes with an assumption of dignity that was ludicrous.

"In that case I have no more to say."

This was satisfactory so far as it went; but as



her portly form was disposed to block all ways of escape, he hardly knew how to make use of the welcome form of dismissal.

He need not have troubled, however. A young woman, who had been eyeing him for some minutes with fierce intention, rose to the occasion, if not exactly to what could be called the rescue.

“If Mrs. Winchester’s through with you,” she said in an American twang not unpleasing, “I’d like a word or two myself.”

Possibly the old lady saw in her an avengeress; at any rate she condescended to sweep her silk skirts aside sufficiently to allow him egress, but it was with the recollection of Scylla and Charybdis in his mind that he took the place indicated by his new assailant. She was eager, it transpired, to complain, not of her own lines, but of the absence of what she called “fat” in those of her *fiancé*, the gentleman of anæmic aspect by whom Vanda had placed herself at the first rehearsal. It seemed that he was entitled—en-



gaged indeed—to play second male fiddle in Conquest's productions.

“I'd thank you,” she said with flashing eyes, “to explain which is the second fiddle, for it seems to me Adolphus is never allowed to open his mouth except to pour wine into it, and he can do that just as well at home.”

“They say,” said the victim of her indignation with spirit, “that it takes a great artist to tackle the question of intoxication. Adolphus will not fail me on the occasion; his actual lines, as you say, are inconsequent and meager, but the margin left for suggestion is very wide.”

She stopped to muse on this, and lost him, for the crowd, surging in on their brief silence, swamped the voice of the individualist, and the combined attack defeated its own purpose and ultimately accorded him his escape. Leaving Greek to annihilate Greek, he slipped out of the throng and took refuge beside Sibyl.

“What a crew,” he muttered, turning his back to the clamor.



"You must strike an average," she told him cheerfully; "you've seen us at night and found us wonderful; you've seen us in the morning and found us ridiculous. We're neither one nor the other; we're ordinary workpeople, and we have to roll up our shirt-sleeves at times."

"Us!" he said mockingly. "You don't belong. Why don't you draw the lines of division you're entitled to? What do you mean by looking on at all this—this impudence with that quite unperturbed expression? Can't you see the paint?"

"I see faces underneath, tired faces, pitiful and fearful faces."

"What! A philosopher? or is it a philanthropist? You're not an actress," he added on a sudden prick of disturbing memory.

"What makes you say so?"

"That extraordinary performance of yours. What were you up to?" He spoke carelessly, rather too carelessly to convince.



“Was I up to something?” she asked with a rare touch of eagerness. For an instant his resolution wavered, he considered a line of retreat, but discarded it in deference to an impulse of curiosity.

“You seemed inclined, Miss Conquest, to bring out a personal conception of that girl—a conception I hadn’t bargained for when I created her. I thought my play and its purpose were under the shelter of your approval.”

“They were—they are; but I’ve been studying them.”

“That’s nice of you; and you’ve found a wheel within a wheel?” he inquired with the benevolent air of a patriarch addressing a small child, an air that she met and set at a palpable disadvantage by entire gravity.

“The gray people,” she began laboriously—“the dolls as you call them—seem to have breath in their bodies when one gets quite close. It seems to me——” but at this interesting point she paused, looking over his shoulder towards the



front of the stage. "Mother wants you," she added laconically.

"Hadden, Hadden, where have you got to? We've settled the technical problems, now we want to tackle the vital ones. It's for you to decide where I'm to stand when the conviction comes to me that treachery is intended."

He obeyed the summons, though not very graciously. For a full minute his eye answered the flattery in hers with inattention; but she did not take long to dispel this first cloud; she smiled into it; she laid intimate fingers on his; she produced a few of the thousand-and-one tricks of her trade, and watched him come to heel with well-hidden satisfaction. She gave him, as before, at the right moment, his order of dismissal, sweetening the acerbity of it with a herb he would be certain to like.

"I'm off myself," she said with a sigh of exhaustion, "off to sport my oak; I'm going to lie on my back and worm myself into the very soul of this creation of ours; it won't be hard; it isn't



like entering a new house, it's like going back to an old one, to that lost home in which one's best and bravest fancies have been shut up for a number of years. I'm going to ferret them all out and polish them up till the gold glitters, and not a soul shall come near me. And you, Hadden? You're a man, so I suppose it wouldn't do to try and exact such religious zeal from you. You must be allowed to dilute your sense of spiritual monarchy, so it's good-by until to-morrow. One o'clock, please; a cutlet, and business. The others are all engaged, so we shall be free to thrash out our unfashionable theories and opinions. Good-by, and don't let these people damp your enthusiasm; they're only supers, the lot of them; it doesn't signify how cross and how stupid they are. I'm the only person you've allowed to signify, and I shan't fail you; for the next week we're partners, you and I, co-workers, and I'm a good worker; even my whims and vanities go into the stock-pot when I'm creating, be very sure of that."



In a dream of recovered self-esteem he made his way out of the theater without so much as a glance to right or left.

If he thought of Sibyl and of the broken thread of her confidence, it was in idle fashion. The interesting daughter of a more interesting mother seemed at once a fair and a reassuring definition of the case of general relationship.



## CHAPTER VII

### A GLASS OF TOKAY

VANDA'S boudoir had been decorated to harmonize with certain of her own physical attributes rather than with the taste of any particular century or school of art. Eastern silks and ornaments lent it the barbaric air best suited to her normal mood. Over the back of the divan she had thrown a leopard skin, and against the dappled hide the dull copper of her hair showed up to advantage. She wore, as usual, a loose wrapper of her favorite shade of brown, and such light as she saw fit to introduce played over it with weird effect, splashing the somber stuff, here with gold and there with orange. Hadden, sitting half the length of the room away regarding the gown and its wearer through a haze of tobacco smoke, was blissfully unaware that illusion had already marked him for her own.



The luncheon had been served for two; the table strewn with flowers and trails of featherly green; the dishes, limited in quantity but perfect in quality, had not failed to make appeal to a sometime abstainer. And with the feast she had offered him confidences. Amusedly she thought of the glass of Tokay with which, before rising from the table, she had toasted his future, and of the history she had so deftly mixed with it—the history of a woman's life prisoned, like a good wine, until its value should have matured; the history of her own life and lot—such parts of both, that is to say, as could be calculated on to intoxicate a romantic fancy.

Noting his ardent glances and the trembling of the hand that held the Turkish cigarette, she had but little doubt as to the winning of any game on which she might decide to embark with him; but, vanity suggesting one and policy another, she was disposed to let the tide of converse take its own way.

“There's a picture on your right,” she told



him, moving a languid arm in that direction, "painted when I was ten years old. Turn your head if you want to see something rather pretty."

"I don't; and you were never the normal, pretty child in cambric and coral."

"Turn your head," she repeated gaily, "and you'll see that I was."

"No. Prettiness was, is and ever will be outside your province," he insisted with obstinacy. "Sometimes you're beautiful, often you're ugly, to-day you're perfect."

"And perfection's wearisome, they tell me."

"Not your sort; not from this distance, anyway. See where you've put me. You talked, of course, of the most comfortable chair, but that was humbug."

Her interest quickened a degree. She looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"Shall I give you leave to come nearer?"

"I shouldn't come. I get the better view from this distance; that's why I submitted to it so tamely."



“I see and I appreciate.” She spoke the truth. Here was a flash of independence in a toy pan. Fortified by wine and flattery he was proposing to play the game at level stakes. Inwardly she smiled at such presumption, outwardly she sighed. She introduced the minor key and fluted once again of childhood and its gossamer happenings. Inspired by his attention, by the intensity of his regard, she produced figures innumerable. Vivid, fantastic as they were, it was yet plain his fancy was content to follow the flight of each. It was only when, weary herself of the monotonously beautiful pageant, she began to insert some of the darker shades that belong to memory that his sympathy showed signs of flagging, and, once more, she paused to consider the diverse aims in her temperament. As a devotee he was bound eventually to pall and as a goddess pure and simple she was equally bound to encounter rebuff. Bound to her chariot wheel, he could provide her with little novelty of sensation; riding the winged horse of his ambition he would presently forge out of sight.



With rising zeal she hunted a middle course, striking now this note and now that with delicate, artist fingers.

“ If you won’t look at me in cambric and coral, I’ll make you look at me in silver gauze. I was a Christmas fairy when they first put me on the boards, and I had wings and little silver shoes and a star on my forehead. I waved my wand, and poverty and pain decamped; the children of the poor held out their arms to me; the monsters of the forest yielded way. I bound the world in flowers, set it to music, beat the time and chose the measure. It was a glad beginning of the day of life. In dreams the wonder of it comes again. But as I look, the ghoul Experience whispers, and I know that it’s a dream, the dream that I grew out of. A fairy-queen, to be effective, Hadden, should be no higher than a grown person’s heart. I passed the limit, and they turned my talents into a new field; they made a devil of me—scarlet vest and scarlet hose, hoofs and a tail and a red light, out of the circle of which, for all my ingenious



and mischievous devices, I found it was impossible to escape. It was equally impossible to escape the mental attributes of my new rôle. Wherever I went there went with me little inbred sin; and, as surely as I had once brought peace and goodwill, I now brought friction.

“Hadden, the horror, the cruelty of the thing lay in the fact that I—the personal, growing I—was meshed as firmly in the net of evil suggestion as once I had been meshed in another. It seemed I could play saint or sinner with equal aptitude. I dreamed of hell in those days instead of heaven, and yet I went to bed just as eagerly as ever. There were snakes in the garden, and they made it lively, if dangerous.”

“Don’t!” he said, and she flashed on him a look of scorn.

“What! You want to play with me like all the rest? What are you afraid of? The horror? the cruelty? I’d no right to use such phrases. The snake makes you jump the first time you land on him, but evil’s a term I begin to



think that we misuse. The old legends would have taught us better. They maintain that the serpent is symbolical of deity, for it feeds on its own body; of renovation, for it casts its skin and grows young at pleasure; of eternity, for it is represented with its tail in its mouth; lastly, it's the emblem of wisdom. One must try all shapes if one is to discover the true and the permanent one. You wince, and that reminds me that last night I lay awake for a long time and I came to a conclusion."

"Yes?" he said, and laid his half-smoked cigarette in the Indian tray at his elbow.

"It can't be much more unwelcome to you than it was to me," she added, with what he was invited to take for apology.

"I quarreled with it as fiercely as you will quarrel. I defied it and denied it, but I had to give way in the end."

"You provoke my curiosity, Vanda. It was to be, Vanda, wasn't it? This must be a conclusion connected with my career."



"You must go back." She raised herself on one elbow, expression and attitude alike denoting nervous excitement. "Hadden, you must go back. Don't look at me like that, or I shall forget that I swore to be rational, unprejudiced. I shall begin to recall what it all means to me, what I'm giving up. Colleagues have failed me before, one after another, and none came quite so far as you in that marvelous prelude of yours. Reading it, I forgot your age, your sex, your education, everything but the intoxicating idea that I was not alone; that a man, young and strong and resourceful, kept pace with me—no, passed me, cut steps for me in the rocky way of spiritual exploration. You built a figure big enough to blot out all the older, lesser idols of our imagination, but, alas, she too will fall to pieces."

"Go on, please."

His tone was admirably calm, but it did not deceive her. Eagerly she resumed, for she had seen the opening desirable, and the audacity of the new line of action tickled her ingenuity.



Relying on the law of perversity, she was resolved to prod him down the path she least intended he should take.

“It wants more than courage and idealism,” she went on sadly, “to found the new heaven and earth, the new code of legislature. You’re to reduce the sum to a common denominator, to a single woman; but in that woman there must be the breath of life, and the breath of life comes only from one source, the source of self-abnegation. That one woman, who is to embody the whole human race and to restore to it its pristine purity, will answer to no voice but that of entire devotion. She will be touched by no hands that have busied themselves with lesser shapes. With all your insight, with all your wealth of generous feeling and intent, you haven’t fully gauged the claims of your model, the fund of jealousy, and righteous jealousy, she conceals behind her air of deific condescension. It’s sacrilege, no less, to accord her any sort of material treatment. Like the rainbow, she evades analysis; impossible to



say, 'Here ends the purple, here begins the blue, and here the yellow and the rose combine,' for there are colors within colors, there are gradations of light and shades so fine as to defy mortal perspicuity, and these are only to be defined by negative measures, by a letting-go of the familiar five senses and throwing oneself on the mercy of the unknown, the ephemeral."

"Well," he answered with control, "I should be glad to know how I have transgressed against this peculiar code."

"We're too grave," she said, with a change of note. "It isn't tragedy we're facing now; it's escape from tragedy. I made the discovery yesterday at rehearsal. I turned my head at a particular moment, and it was then that the conclusion came to me, though I refused to accept it without a struggle. You mustn't frown. I'm not tampering wantonly with your dignity as an individual. It's as a partisan of my half forlorn and half divine cause that I'm obliged to put your qualifications and disqualifications on the carpet."



Don't you know that when there's a dangerous expedition afoot we leave the married men behind?"

"And, turning your head at a particular moment yesterday, you saw in me a married man?" he inquired with scathing emphasis.

"I saw the embryo married man. Oh, don't mistake me. My little Sibyl doesn't signify, but she stood at the moment for a force that does. You belong to Dame Grundy, and she isn't a lady to let go her nurslings easily. I saw the fate you've tried to shake off settling back on you; I saw what you're eventually bound to see yourself—the desirable wife, the son at Eton, the daughter sacrificed to the social fetish you've tried so gallantly to defy; I saw warm slippers at the hearth, an easy-chair—in sum, I saw the madness of inciting you to follow the cruel line of resistance of the flesh."

In the silence that followed she was pricked by a doubt, but it was too late to retreat.



"Tell me I've not offended you, Hadden."

"You've mistaken me. Can't you understand that all types have their value?"

"Yes, but—Sibyl? So—so ostentatiously normal."

"You're wrong, Vanda; she isn't that."

"What then?" There was no trace of her inward consternation in her low voice.

"She's like—like a piece of crystal," he replied after an interval, lifting eyes grown suddenly pensive. "You look intently into it and you find substances foreign to the crystal."

"Yes—yes," she murmured from the depths, it would seem, of sympathetic reverie. "I know, I know too well. In a mirror, in a pool of clear water, in a square of glass, the fancy is free to breed. When she was a tiny child I held her on my lap and I played with her apathy, but—I made no headway. Drummond," she added with dejection, "uses the crystal as a symbol of lifelessness; it is beautiful of its kind, but it can never alter its kind; do what you will with it, back it



always reverts to its hexagonal perfection, its radiant vaunt of complete incompleteness."

"Drummond may be wrong."

"He may; he *shall*," she answered quickly. "We'll keep the value of that most beloved little crystal, even at the expense of reason. *You* shall, at least."

"I?" He spoke with rising color.

"It's a way out, Hadden."

"A way out of what?"

"Out of the turmoil of a life like mine."

"And you would be willing to change yours for another—for hers?"

She feigned embarrassment, distress, appeared to hunt and to reject a multitude of replies. "I—oh, I," she stammered, "I'm different. You—you saw it for yourself. I never was the normal, pretty child. At six years old I stood my baptism of fire; I learned to dance, and to play all kinds of music. You mustn't allow me to count."

"That's easier said than done," he replied, leav-



ing his chair and approaching her, but only to be waved back by a pair of appealing hands.

“No nearer. I won’t have you any nearer. You trouble the water, and I want to see my old visions in it. They’re all I have, all I shall ever have. Go back; do you hear, go back!”

“And if I can’t? If I tell you it’s too late? If I tell you I must go your way, not because it’s *an* adventure, but because it’s *the* adventure for which I’ve been tracking ever since my childhood? If I swore to you——” but now her hands were at her ears; she looked wildly at him for an instant; then in response, so it would seem, to the authority in his own glance, they fell, her face stiffened into the mold of awe, she whispered brokenly, imploringly.

“Don’t swear, I beg you. If you make the oath, you’ll keep it. I know you’re kind; and *you* don’t know all that it means, this resigning of the spirit to great winds. Go back, dear boy; dear, handsome, kindly, clever boy, go back and compromise; write of the domestic hearth, write of



sleek, sweet mothers and gamboling children. You've the art to gild these things, and they'll take a fine polish. It'll pay all ways, take my word for it, the word of a public favorite. Turn the light of your phenomenal talent, not on to the unexplored wonders of sea and land, but on to fashion."

He took the bait with avidity, dropping to his knees beside her couch, catching her hands, setting them with tender impulse to his cheek.

"Very eloquent, very disinterested; but don't you know you're the refutation of your own logic? You tell me to find life in the other camp, and all the time I see, I feel the throb of it here, in you, in your courage, in your independence. I take the oath to myself, since you won't let me make it to you, the oath of allegiance to all you'd have me turn my back on. I can't play in the shallows among the goldfish while you go out to sea in that big ship I built for you, in that forerunner of a great fleet—I can't. Oh, Vanda, Vanda, to yield me up to such ignoble rivals!"



"How could I tell? How could I know that you were strong enough? None of the others were; they all went back; they couldn't pay the price. Why do you kiss my hands?"

"I don't know," he faltered, and put them to his lips again.

In the room the light was dim; about her and her draperies there hung a scent seductive, provocative, unfamiliar; it seemed to link her with the great bowl of lilies on the table behind. He looked from her to them, his senses floating; the long tapering stems appeared to stir like fingers; in each wax-like bell he thought to catch vibration. Shifting his glance he found the leopard skin and the black spots on the pale, buff background were moving too; all things were moving, changing; forces in himself were yielding to the spell, and for an instant she dallied with the danger; then policy, like a cool hunter, content to wait until the quarry was at close quarters, stepped forward and took a careful aim.

"But I know," she cried with an ingenious ring



of exultation; "it's the hand of Galatea, prisoned for years innumerable in the marble of ignorance and prejudice; under your kiss the blood will begin to flow; soon, very soon, there will be life where there was only mechanism, for the vow was made. I tried to stop it, I tried to bar the way of the deliverer, but I wasn't strong enough. I'm glad, oh, but I'm glad to know I wasn't strong enough, to know that that false, worldly self is to be worsted, silenced, put to shame and death."

He kissed the hand again, and with a marked decrease of passion. He looked up at her and her surroundings with a less frenzied eye. The lilies in the bowl had ceased to quiver; there was a tinge of brown at the tip of each flower; they were grass, and to-morrow they would go into the oven; the spots of the leopard skin were steady now; it was a fine skin, but it was the skin of an animal worsted by the prowess of man. The copper head on it was fine too, but he had elected to look higher than personality, he had chosen to



play the reformer, not the lover, and he got slowly, not ungracefully, to his feet.

"You're very strong," he said, precisely as though the patronizing verdict came from an independent source, "so long as you follow your instinct. When you drop to the consideration of the common points of view you lose your power. You mustn't do it again; it isn't fair to me or to yourself. There must be no further misunderstanding between us, no more attempts to attach worldly policy to first causes and possible last results."

"No," she said, and the quiver of the low monosyllable sounded pleasantly in his ear. She turned her head away, for the quiver of her pliant lip would not have fitted quite so well into the scheme of things as propounded so confidently by him, designed so subtly by her.



## CHAPTER VIII

### VOX POPULI

THE curtain had fallen on the first act of "The Sinking Ship" and the audience was uncertain what reception to accord. The performers were summoned three times before the curtain, and treated to bursts of enthusiasm of a spasmodic kind. On their retreat, clamor broke loose from every part of the crowded house, and, on the whole, the forecast was unfavorable. It was one thing, the majority averred, to summon spirits from the vasty deep, but, as the cynic so aptly remarks in his diary, "will they come?" and modern society was inclined to answer "no." It was, however, entertaining to discuss the self-confidence of Vanda Fane, to foretell the downfall of a presumptuous and long-indulged public



favorite. The women, at least, were prepared to make the most of this unexpected invitation to look round upon the nakedness of a land long and artfully concealed from their inquisitive or jealous eyes. As for Conquest, he remained a reassuring link with the past, for it was the old path—or a very good imitation of it—on which he was discovered, in company with the harmless and necessary family lawyer of fiction, when the curtain rose, and the tale unfolded by the one, punctured by expletives from the other, diverged but little from the beaten track of precedent. Approaching the age of fifty, the hero finds himself released from dependence by the death of an uncle to whom, from boyhood, he has been obliged to play satellite; and, synchronous with this welcome order of release, there comes to him a very different piece of knowledge. The woman who has shared his life for twenty years will have to be repudiated. Faithful to her during all this period of discomfort, he is compelled to own to his confidential servant that he has succumbed, but



a few weeks back, to the very different charms of a girl of nineteen, and that he is mentally incapable of refusing the offer of her hand made to him, French fashion, by her guardian. The new Marquis de Laure takes over with his fine inheritance the responsibility of a sick conscience, and to him in his distress comes Vanda in disarray. For the first time during a long life of self-control, feeling has outrun discretion. In a hideous, black gown, with tumbled hair and a pale face distorted by agitation, she flies to hear the confirmation of the rumor that has reached her, and along with it she hears, all too plainly, that second tale, that most cruel repudiation of her claim. With the quickness of one schooled in the ways of circumlocution, she comprehends the situation. Material aids to beauty have been forgotten under the exigency of the moment; and now, as she accepts his halting answers to her pertinent and probing questions, all the spiritual attributes of that state seem to withdraw; she seems positively to shrink before the puzzled eyes of the audience.



Mute and broken, she looks at her betrayer, a long look, in which the undercurrent of lives such as theirs appears to run openly, a river of mud and of blood hurrying, not to the open sea, but to the bottomless pit of annihilation. And yet beneath her calm there is, perceptibly to the highly-strung, the promise of approaching storm. It is still far away; it will not break immediately, with dramatic vehemence, over this most deserving head. The man obtains his second order of release; he is dismissed to assimilate, to enjoy, if he can, this new fancy; and the fancy is christened gently, kindly—a little too gently and kindly quite to convince an ear less partial than that of a lover. With his departure the sense of coming disaster grows more perceptible. Impossible now for any one to mistake the nature of the deserted woman's passivity; and, before familiarity can breed contempt of its significance, it has been fired by a runnel of vitality, brief and vivid as a first flash of lightning across a stretch of open country. The lowered eyelids rise; the long, flaming



eyes move over the empty stage from right to left and back again; a shiver runs the length of the shabby form and the head goes back; the line from chin to shoulder gleams out of the darkness, silhouetted against the black oak paneling of the somber room. She utters a low cry, a half strangled, wholly moving sound; she moves forward, one of those swift familiar rushes, and it is as though a forest creature, waking from its winter sloth, became once more imbued with life; but it is not the life with which her audience is cognizant; it is a movement of that haunting fourth dimension which still stands outside the pages of the mathematical primer. This is a prologue; the usual stage pieces of resistance are but accessories, and the main theme—to the intuition of the more intelligent—is to move on into the vague and shadowy region commonly known as “the problematic.”

Truly a divergence from the customs of this particular house, and a sounding slap in the faces of those idyllic lords and ladies, presented at such



expense through so many seasons. No wonder the public and the press should hesitate to pronounce a verdict, for it is precisely on such occasions as these that the tide, "taken at the flood," carries a discriminating critic into the harbor of pre-eminence, while there is nothing more fatal to such happy achievement than the proclamation of a false prophet.

At this early stage of the proceedings it was therefore best to be circumspect, and in the dress portions of the house such a tendency was most conspicuous.

"What do you make of it?" a young officer of unhealthy aspect asked of his neighbor in one of the boxes.

"Nothing—as yet; but I fancy that woman can be trusted to take care of herself."

He regarded her youthful features with some interest.

"You don't approve these footlight ladies?" he asked quizzically.

"Are we likely to approve them any more than



you approve the Boer whose bullet, rumor says, you've still got in your side?"

"Oh! Then the rivalry's acknowledged at last?"

"Yes. The position is too desperate to be ignored. We're in the open, Mr. Hallidan, as you ought to know, seeing that you yourself are very much in the thick of the conflict. Yes; we're frankly on the war-path. Night after night we buckle on our armor and turn up at these boring performances with a courage worthy of—I won't say a better cause—but a more responsive one."

He met her provocative glance with real appreciation.

"Go on, Miss Mercer. You've always had my admiration, as you're well aware; but you're beginning to assault my curiosity. Go on; your mother's quite engrossed with somebody in the stalls. You realized——?"

"I realized," she broke in lightly, "that if we didn't turn our faculties on pretty quickly there would be a very thin red line of heroes to rescue.



The history of the war of this last year alone makes gruesome reading; it's been a wholesale slaughter of the innocents; elder sons going down like so many ninepins; coronets filched and strawberry-leaves plucked and scattered or pinned carelessly to the sleeve of a mimic dairymaid. Nothing too sacred to be subjected to the devastating assault of the front row of a female chorus. But the worst is over; I tell you solemnly, the worst is over. They've taken the position, but they can't hold it now that we've recognized the need of personal interference, now that we've thrown off our cumbersome garments of so-called dignity. We're too many for them, too well-educated for them; our mothers are bringing us on in legions, in well-organized legions. Look at me—yes, as closely as you please. I'm on sale as surely as they are, and I'm not nearly so expensive. You can corroborate the truth of these vaunts; my brother will guarantee my temper; my maid will guarantee my complexion and my hair; Somerset House will guarantee me a little fortune of my



own, enough to pay for gowns. I'm twenty-two, and it seems a pity, don't you think, I should be taken at the Sibylline price? Oh! and one advantage more—it's probably the most useful of the lot—I've taught myself never to open my eyes when there's anything disagreeable about."

"It couldn't have been more frankly put on the other side of the footlights," he answered, slowly smoothing his slight mustache back from his lips in meditative fashion. "I—I'll think it over, Miss Mercer."

"Thank you, so much. Mother, Mr. Hallidan is going to think it over."

"Think what over?" the bejeweled lady at the back of the box inquired in a bewildered manner.

"Need you ask, dear? What you've been thinking over, what I've been thinking over, what all my sisters, cousins and aunts have been busy thinking over the last five years."

"Mary, you're talking nonsense. She's always doing it, Mr. Hallidan, and in such atmos-



phere it's not to be wondered at. The play, now. What are they aiming at? I can't make head or tail of it. I only know this theater's considered the most comfortable place in town for an after-dinner nap, and it's belying its reputation. If that woman wants to go to pieces she needn't do it in public; and if she's dilapidated now, what in the world will she be after we've had four more acts of her?"

Mr. Hallidan didn't know or didn't care. Plays only amused him in so far as they gave opportunity for physical display to women of attraction. In the stalls, however, there were many disposed to criticize from a less restricted basis, and one pretty woman, ostentatiously the artist in dress, in manner and in language, held a court to whom she explained, very minutely, the impression made upon the sensitive place of her mind by the performance so far as it had gone.

"There are two, and only two, possible outcomes," she insisted. "Either the Fane woman



sees no more fields of conquest, and meditates a dramatic exit from the stage through the door of suicide, or she has discovered some ingenious inventor with a stagelight calculated to supply rejuvenation. She has made all the splash she can above the ordinary water-line; now she contemplates performing underneath, trading on our curiosity concerning the occult and the obscure. There is a daughter on the programme, and that favors my first supposition. Death before the dishonor of being superseded in public favor. Take my word for it, my friends, there is to be tragedy enacted here to-night. In the third act a golden drinking vessel will be produced and filled to the brim with stage-poison; unobserved by all save myself and those I have forewarned, a real poison will be added, and a scene of unrivaled excitement will ensue. We shall be treated to the representation of a genuine death agony, the tale of which will live to the end of time."

This theory finding advocates and scoffers, dis-



cussion flourished, running into extravagant channels.

In the dress circle too there was animated discussion, though much of it was concerned with the attitude of the audience. In this part of the house it is an incontestable fact that artistic acumen is least developed. One might fairly talk of three classes of frequenter. Firstly, the class that prefers comfort to fashion, that likes to lean back and digest a good dinner without risking the penalty of the stiff neck that comes from sitting sideways in a box, or the crick that invariably appertains to a seat in a front stall. Secondly, the parasite faction, who love to boast (from a little way off) of their kinship with society, and to exercise the rights of relationship in proverbial fashion. The interval is their Waterloo. With a zeal that is hardly decorous, and very often disastrous to the gowns of their neighbors, they make a rush for the front of the circle the moment the curtain falls and proceed to rake the plains below with opera-glasses. They discover and denounce



all the husbands sitting with other people's wives, and a good many who are innocently and most contentedly sitting with their own; and no amount of correction ever seems to curb these peculiar pleasure-seekers or to put them to the blush of confusion. And thirdly, there is the class who come with kind, expectant faces and a poor relative in tow, to enjoy the rare excitement of an outing. They are prepared to be impressed and pleased with everything, most of all, perhaps, with the effect of the wonderful entertainment upon the young folks present, and when, as too often happens, the story crosses the boundary defined by their intelligence or their taste, they invariably meet the emergency as the ostrich is supposed to meet his enemies; they bury their simple heads in the sand of an utter refusal to take the ugly situation in; they glue their eyes to some fine piece of scenery, to some pretty girl's frock, to anything that will suffice to give the mind a counter-occupation from the one indicated. It is not from the dress circle that the vote of success or failure is-



sues. The voice from the circle above is infinitely more significant, and here, on this particular night, discontent was rife. The company in the upper circle is very largely composed of young persons who have "hopes of one another," and who are just dowered sufficiently with worldly goods to afford a comfortable seat at a reasonable figure. The price of that seat is never very far from their recollection; consequently they are alive to what they call their rights. "The Sinking Ship" could certainly not be said, thus far, to cater to those rights. Here was no inciting advocate of Hymen to help transform the hesitating wooer into a pronounced suitor, and a young woman from a hat shop in Bond Street went so far as to announce her intention of "chucking the thing" and going home. This drastic mode of expressing disapproval was however overruled by the gentleman "treating," and without any very great expenditure of eloquence.

"I don't want to disappoint you, Mr. Robinson, and spoil your evenin' out. I'm not one to



think of myself and my feelings at any time; but it's no use my saying this show's what I expected. The fact is, Miss Fane's like the rest; she finds it don't pay to play the lady. She's held out longer than most—I'll say that for her; but she's going to break out to-night, if I'm not very much mistaken. It's an awful life these folks lead behind the scenes. I could tell you things, Mr. Robinson, that would make your hair stand on end."

Mr. Robinson was pleased by this allusion to his hair. It looked as though Miss Eastham, on whom he had serious designs, hadn't noticed that such a feat as the one alluded to was practically impossible. He passed his hand over the smooth surface of his bald head, wondering, on second thoughts, whether Fate had gone one better and restored that thin, auburn patch that had once, in the long-ago, been the pride of his adoring mother. In another walk of life Mr. Robinson would undoubtedly have been entitled to call himself a *mystic*, and his interest in the prosaic shop-



girl was at perpetual war with other of his proclivities.

“I got it all from my sister Bessie,” she was saying confidentially; “she had a fancy to try the stage; went to see this very man, Conquest, and he looked her over as if she were a horse for sale; told her to take off her hat, and then if he didn’t run his hand through her hair! She scooted for the street in double-quick time. The next man called her ‘my dear’ slick off, and the next one said there wasn’t a demand just then for her sort of figure, and then George put his oar in for the twentieth time. She was low, as you may guess, and running short of bus fares. She didn’t fancy him particular; but everything seemed to fit in. He got a rise, and his mother died (such an old termagant, and)—well, she caved in and took him, and I don’t know that she ever regrets it, except when she’s in the theater and sees men looking smart and spry; but, as I tell her, she should see ’em the next morning at eight o’clock when George is going off to the city as brisk and cheer-



ful as you please. It don't do to take folks on their night value; I've learned that in my business. You take my glass and look down there—second box on the right—a woman with a long yellow switch in her hair; it's no more hers than it's mine. She's a Mrs. Torry—American—and as 'go-ahead' as they make 'em. She pulled that thing out of one of our hats this morning, and, you mark my words, not a penny will she pay for it. She never pays for anything except by sending her friends to pull our goods about; but we daren't make a fuss. She's got into the right set, and she's got a tongue you can hear across half London. We've got to accept her good word instead of her cheque, and be thankful into the bargain."

Mr. Robinson ignored the offered glasses. He had lapsed into an air of melancholy retrospection.

"What's up with you?" the lady demanded, becoming aware of this division of sympathy.



“Nothing. I’m thinking it all out.”

“What? Trade worries?”

“No. This here play. I’ve told you a good deal about myself, Miss Eastham, but I haven’t ever told you that I’m a playwright.”

“Gracious!” said the girl mischievously. “You don’t say so? And why, pray, haven’t you brought me to see *your* masterpiece then, instead of this twaddle?”

“Because the managers won’t look at it,” he said lugubriously. “They don’t want masterpieces. But if this here work is going to go down”—he jerked his thumb meaningly towards the stage—“there’ll be a call before long for me. This young man—what’s his name, Renshaw?—has got a-many of my notions. I can’t wrap ’em up quite as fine as he can; I’ve not been to the university; but I tell you we’re on the same job. He calls it ‘The Sinking Ship’; I call it”—he dropped his voice yet lower, looking warily for the eavesdropper—“‘The Soul of Peter Pindar.’ He’s going to use a woman to point his moral;



I've used a man; but it's the same moral. Miss Eastham, have you ever heard of the Trend?"

"The Trend? No, indeed, unless you mean the coming fashions. I've heard of them right enough, and precious ugly they are."

"It's a fashion," said the little man, impressively, "in ideas, and not in garments, and it's coming this way, Miss Eastham; it's coming slow, but it's coming sure; it's in the atmosphere; it's hanging over our heads; it's circling around us, and the circle's getting smaller and smaller. Why, even here to-night, where you'd think to escape from anything gloomy and mysterious, blessed if it isn't here too!"

"But what is it?" she asked, growing curious in spite of herself.

"I can't tell you; nobody can tell you; you've got to feel it for yourself. Didn't you feel it ten minutes back when that woman was standing there? for I did, right down my spine and right up into the roots of my hair," he told her, in sublime forgetfulness at the moment of his lack of



that commodity. But Miss Eastham decided she didn't want to yield to this call of the supernatural.

"No, I didn't," she said tartly. "I felt a bit uncomfortable, as I always do with these improper plays when I've got a man along. If I'd had a notion what you were letting me in for I'd have stayed at home—upon my word I would—and rested my back. I've had an ache in the right shoulder blade for nearly three months now, and it's time I got rid of it."

"That's the beginning," he said eagerly.

"The beginning of what—rheumatism? I hope to goodness it isn't."

"It's the beginning of the influence. You start by feeling uncomfortable, and you go on to quarreling with your food and your relatives and your prospects and everything you've been content to call your life."

It was plain he voiced symptoms that must have been troubling him for some time. He looked very pale under the electric lights, and a



shining line of sweat had broken out along his high forehead.

“Come, Mr. Robinson; it’s not like you to be down-hearted. You’re a sensible man with a sound business, and if things do go up and down a bit with those idiots in Parliament, you know as well as I do that we’ll have ’em out before very long now. And it’s the same for everybody. We’re not selling as we ought, though we’ve as good a name as any in London.”

“Parliament!” he answered with unimpaired gravity. “It hasn’t anything to do with Parliament.”

“It’s like a riddle,” she told him, with an effort after levity. “It’s evidently in Miss Fane and not in Parliament; it’s in you, and it’s most certainly not in me. Can’t be a letter of the alphabet; but I’ll bet it’s just as silly. I’ll tell you what it is; it’s underfeeding. You’ve been dining off an egg, as I do at times, and it doesn’t pay.”

Mr. Robinson was eventually persuaded to



leave it at that, and to accept refreshment from the little bag his companion produced.

Above them again the gallery and in the gods opinions and suspicions were exchanged yet more freely, if even less grammatically. There was the funny man to direct operations and hit many a serious nail on the head with the hammer of his lively wit. The heroine of the night overwhelmed him as little as did the giggling expostulations of his girl, whose "shut up, Joe!" was a familiar stimulus to effort.

"We're in for dirty weather, mates," he declared jocosely. "When a lady lets you orf as easy as all that, she ain't done with you. I'd rather 'ave a 'clout on side o' t' head,' as they say Lancashire way, than one of them nasty looks."

The never-to-be-solved question as to how deep the wiles of woman go, and are entitled to go, was bandied about as briskly as below stairs. The suffragette was not slow to get her oar in and apply it briskly to all the male knuckles within



reach; the anti-suffragette was not long rising to the defense of the occasion, but her eloquent recitation of the theory of St. Paul, and her own virtuous and uncompromising acceptance of it, was robbed of its due effect by her little boy, who ought to have been safely in bed, but who, demoralized by the rare delights of dissipation and unlimited bull's-eye, chipped in with a shrill and all too pertinent account of how pa came by the piece of sticking-plaster on the bridge of his long nose.

Personality having got a footing, the argument waxed loud, and the law, in navy blue and bright buttons, administered a little mild expostulation. The inevitable baby woke to the brawl and lent a melancholy contribution. But, with the rising of the curtain, clamor simmered down, attention set in with admiration to follow, for the stage had been reset in lavish style.



## CHAPTER IX

### THE WHEEL WITHIN THE WHEEL

THE taste of the unhappy manager was here, at last, apparent, and a veritable feast of color had been produced. The public was invited to assist at the celebration of harvest-home. The stacks of corn, more yellow than nature's own, the gala costumes of the peasants, far more picturesque and effective than correct, the marvelous dresses of the aristocracy who graced the occasion with rare condescension, made up a whole infinitely reassuring, and central, ensconced in a nest of hay, the *débutante* was discovered and accorded a rapturous welcome. With curls about her neck, with a wreath of poppies on the lap of her white muslin gown, she was suitably employed in repelling the playful advances of a pet lamb, while at her feet the Marquis expatiated idly and



wittily upon the follies of a town life and the virtues of Arcadia.

But the lover's rhapsody was disturbed by a group of acquaintances, and he had to submit to congratulation of a satiric kind, firstly, upon his coming marriage, and secondly, and more suggestively, upon the near prospect of a feast inaugurated in honor of it by one of his friends—*the friend*—so it was more or less delicately hinted—from whom such generosity might least have been expected.

De Laure betrayed but a momentary doubt of the good faith of this nameless person, a doubt all too speedily drowned in a glass of ale; while the lamb, playing up to the occasion with quite uncanny spirit, finished the work of distraction, outdid itself in droll antics, lost its head in fact, and had eventually to be removed, impromptu, by a couple of the over-dressed laborers.

Levity was further encouraged by the entrance of the Guardian, of whom mention has been made. He was designed to figure as the un-



consciously funny man whose optimism is always the butt of his companion's wit, and whose curiosity concerning the past history of the Marquis might have been put on a par with popular interest in the early love affairs of Julius Cæsar.

More heartily than all, he accepted the invitation to the banquet; more cordially than all, he acclaimed his admiration for the interesting hostess, for her person, her character and her Château Lafitte. Universal approval announced the termination of this portion of the play; it was the approval of persons who are breathing properly after a spell of discomfort.

But behind the curtain Hadden Renshaw was being inaugurated into yet more of the idiosyncrasies of the profession, and he was not taking his medicine well. Impossible, he found, to recognize his divinity in the agitated woman he had caught more than once with her eye to the hole in the curtain, enumerating the more distinguished of the names of the early arrivals in stalls and boxes; Vanda Fane, face to face with a



crisis in her career, betrayed dependence on some very common human attribute. She was fractious, and, what was worse, she was afraid. Through sheer nervousness she forgot, not only the young author's stock of prejudices, but many of his best lines.

Nor was Conquest altogether a reassuring figure; true, he toiled indefatigably for the good of the cause, he made the most of every word and gesture, but his zeal was purely business zeal, even his few leisure moments were dedicated to the task of raking the dress-portions of the house and dropping a confidential glance into some susceptible, female eye at each such excursion.

Fleeing from disillusion, Hadden found himself, before very long, in the very spot he least desired to seek—beside the one person who never failed to rouse in him a latent and inexplicable sense of self-distrust. But for the present self-distrust was less painful than distrust of others, and Sibyl's clean and clear cheek, which she had resolutely refused to stain with pigments, her



frank smile, her simple converse, offered too invigorating a tonic to be resisted. Where every one else, from the callboy upwards, evinced anxiety, she alone remained her calm and customary self.

Vanda, however, was a woman accustomed to rally as well as to collapse. Before very long her intuition scented the danger and she roused herself to tackle it. The momentous third act was about to begin, and Hadden, standing in the wings, with Sibyl's scarf upon his arm and Sibyl's brown head very close to his shoulder, became aware that the woman in the center of the stage, awaiting the rise of the curtain, was regarding him with a challenging glance.

The beat of his heart quickened, and once again he thought of the lamp to which his fancy had often likened her face; and as he stared he saw her head go back in the fashion he had learned to love and watch for; the lips parted and he caught the ivory of her teeth against the red of them; she smiled through and past him on



towards that original and wonderful vision of herself that he had presumed to question if not actually to denounce.

And she was back in her old trappings of state. In theory he might disdain them, but it was impossible for the flesh not to yield some tribute. Her red-gold hair, dressed high, was held in place by a glittering serpent; her gown of cloth-of-gold was cut to display every line of the gallant figure; low on her forehead hung an Egyptian star of strange design, the tempered luster of the stones in it serving to enhance the brightness of the eyes between which it had been suspended.

Invisible since the grim prologue, it was no wonder that the audience, as well as the emotional youth, should stare, puzzled, disappointed or entranced, each according to temperament or sex.

She stood in a vast reception room lavishly decorated, for here again the manager had been accorded a free hand. On a raised platform, running the length of the back of the stage, a buffet



had been erected and set out with oriental magnificence. Massive dishes of crystal, of jade and of silver-gilt were piled high with fruits and delicacies; jeweled cups and flagons, tall vases of Venetian glass, masses of flowers and ferns, cushioned divans in brilliant shades of silk—all these combined to create an effect little short of intoxicating, and, in ample time to prevent the charm from palling, the low note of intrigue was struck.

Like a bell to whose construction precious metals have been sacrificed, she sounded this same welcome note in diverse ways. Now it was liquid, ingratiating, subdued; now it was mischievous—a silver tinkle; now it was somber—a funeral bell; and, all the while, the stage was filling. Handsome men and women lent color to the scene and significance to the central figure in it. With each new-comer her circle of influence widened, for it was from her and her alone that conspiracy, vague as to aim, but definite as to direction, emanated. And, needless to say, the two to whose honor or whose undoing the gathering



had evidently been called made their entrance at the true dramatic moment, pausing, in the true dramatic way, to establish their identity and their connection with the plot firmly in the minds of the attentive audience.

To a running fire of pleasantry the Marquis moved forward, allowing himself to be absorbed into the ribald mirth of his friends, and, unconsciously, persuaded to increase with every step his distance from his *fiancée*, who, maintaining her place in the doorway, was as speedily surrounded by a second bevy of guests, in accordance with the directions of the presiding genius of the scene.

As before, the girl was dressed in white; but here the straight, prim lines of her gown looked odd beside the flowing apparel of the rest; she had no wreath, moreover, no lamb, no background of yellow wheat, and her vaunt of simplicity struck chill. Her arms, bare to the elbow, had not yet outgrown the angularity that belongs to childhood; the small expanse of neck exposed



showed thin and brown beside the luminous, painted flesh of the other women. Above her head, void of all ornament save the thick smooth coils of her hair, the shafts of doubtful wit and mock flattery flew rapidly, pitilessly, purposefully, and, at each of her failures or refusals to catch and cap the sallies, her audience shrugged and winked and smiled, infusing ever more of malice and less of restraint into every utterance.

Gravely the victim of their ill-breeding looked from one face to another; simply, monotonously, as though each query were legitimate, she tendered her soft responses, till presently, in answer to a preconceived signal, the two battalions melted into one; the betrothed pair were invited by Vanda, with all and more of the ostentation common to the movements of royalty, to take the seats of honor; the two gilded chairs set well above the level of the rest. The feast began, and for a time De Laure maintained his air of satisfaction; he jested and was jested at; he drank and was drunk to; he bent to whisper, now behind a



woman's fan, now into the ear of a boon companion; he accepted not only the challenges to his own wit and aplomb, but those far more numerous ones launched at his lady, until the fusillade became too hot for a single man to meet, and suspicion stirred. All too readily he fell into the trap prepared, all too readily his anger rushed in the direction whither it was meant to rush—upon the incapacity of his chosen wife to meet the badinage of his familiar world. Soldier that he was, as well as juggler of phrases, it made him furious to note her lack of fighting quality. He was, moreover, just a degree less infatuated than on his last public appearance; already the faint pressure of marital chains had begun to fret. The public verdict, for which, in the first glow of his enthusiasm, he had forgotten to canvass, was antagonistic to her, compassionate to him, and compassion was, to one of his temper, the unpardonable wrong.

For the first time he looked at his new toy with attention. If she showed no fear she assuredly



showed no spirit either; innuendo and covert insult failed to infuse fire; and when at last one roisterer, bolder than the rest, shot half the contents of his cup into her lap and babbled, all too carelessly, of accident, she merely smiled, first at him, then down at the red stream of wine disfiguring the purity of her gown.

“Imbecile” was the mutter round the board, and roughly the outraged lover drove the verdict home.

Springing to his feet, in defense of all he knew of the term honor, he contrived in less than a minute to pick a quarrel, on the most fantastic and neutral ground he could discover at such short notice, and arranged to meet no less than half a dozen of the best swordsmen, and the worst offenders present in strict order of social precedence so soon, he poetically observed, as “the early morning sun should tip the little hills with gold.” Pending this effort on the part of the early morning sun, he suggested, with galling civility, a general dispersal; and, by twos and threes, the com-



pany departed, until the great stage was empty save for the figures of the Marquis and those of the two women who had, between them, so suddenly and so unexpectedly effected his ruin.

About to approach the younger, sitting white and motionless as a snow image, he caught the blazing eye of the other, and stood petrified by what that eye appeared slowly to betray. Shaking off his paralysis, he approached her, caught her roughly by the arm, and broke out into low bitter laughter.

"So it came from you," he said between his teeth, "it came from you, traitress, deceiver, *intrigante!*"

"It came from me," she told him with unruffled pride, and then, her aspect melting, she began to tell, in all its bold and idealistic entirety, the story that the young man in the wings had so perseveringly conceived. But, watching her, listening to the limpid notes of her voice, inch by inch the awful conviction was driven home to him that his drama, as once before, was being taken



out of his hands, that his conclusions were being tampered with.

Times out of number this scene in the banquet-hall had been rehearsed under what he had been content to call his own direction. Was it possible, he now asked himself in dire dismay, that the ordinary, handsome, human woman had infected his discrimination? Again, was it possible to insinuate between his phrases such an influence as that with which he appeared to wrestle? Was it possible to divert, convert, pervert a theme such as his without touching a line of his text?

His original maiden had indeed been intended for a foil, she had been designed to emphasize, by her absence of spirit, the intellectual supremacy of her rival, but she had not been meant to play the butt—the white lamb butchered in the cause of flippancy and arrogance; and at this point suspicion doubled again, following a second trail. Was Vanda the arch-enemy after all? Already that night he had questioned the quality of her immunity from earthly weakness; now he ques-



tioned, tentatively, the degree of her control of the situation. Unquestionably she had inflamed the nature of his attack upon insipidity, but had she brought her solution out at the point demanded by her egoism, *and if not, why not?* If she and he were co-victims to some third influence, from whence did it emanate? Reluctantly his mind went backwards to find and reconsider that wheel within a wheel whose almost invisible movements had troubled his serenity at an early stage of rehearsal.

It was a tormenting occupation, for the wheel moved among the most sensitive nerves in his being; it lacerated his vanity and seared his love of monarchy. The discipline was not to be endured for long at a stretch, and he was soon in retreat again down one of those inviting alleys that opportunity exposed so freely. It was plain that the jeweled heroine was having it all her own way with the public; with her powers in full swing again she was carrying her spell-bound listeners clear out of the familiar country of ma-



terialism. The head followed the heart, the heart followed the fancy, piping a tune too ravishing to resist.

Not with fine words only, but with marvelous gestures, with telling changes of expression, she proceeded to dispose of her enemy.

“You would call,” she said, sweeping the still figure on the daïs with a scornful glance, “and none would answer; you would laugh and echo would repeat the laugh as the chill walls of a mine repeat the cries of the entombed miners. The five senses in you, that I have pampered like five beloved children, would fling themselves on that travesty of womanhood and recoil in puzzled terror. Oh, there are deaths and deaths, De Laure. There’s smothering, starvation, and the soldier’s death. It’s that I yield you to, it’s that I choose for you. You’ll die at dawn before one of those too numerous sword-points; you’ll expiate that small, intended wrong to me, that far, far greater intended wrong to yourself, in blood and pain. But listen; as the Indian widows



hurry bravely out to meet the spirits of their adventuring lords, so shall I too slip off this heavy, battered, ugly armor of the flesh the moment that I learn of your departure. Could I give, tell me, could I give a surer gauge of my good faith and my fidelity? We'll meet, eternal lover, be you very sure of that; forces of mind of our quality, going one way, have no choice but to unite. We'll find a wider stage before many hours have gone, and finer rôles to play than those of Marquis and Marchioness. Don't look so tragic; she's only forced our hands. We must have made the venture very soon or tasted disillusion. As long ago the elements were prisoned for a time in transient, human shapes, in forest oaks, in river and in flame, so we have been imprisoned, you and I, in these too common and restricted forms. You've tried to saddle me, if not yourself, with age, decay, incompetency, and all the time you should have spoken of maturity and evolution; for we transmigrate, through finer and ever finer bodies, until the gossamer texture of the last skin dis-



solves, releases us, and we swell the joyous ranks of the emancipated. Look well at us—at her—at me; weigh well the problem of our value, and decide which shares with you this last mortal hour. Who's to fire the quivering pulse to its last outburst of human ecstasy? ”

The instinct of the listening boy was meshed, not in the enthusiasm natural to the occasion, but in that secret doubt he did not dare to force into the open. In every movement of the lithe and beautiful body, in the play of the graceful features, in the witching intonations of the golden voice he had loved so long, he now seemed to detect proof after proof of the illegal union of powers forbidden by the higher law to amalgamate, but in the full house one could truly have heard the dropping of the much-quoted pin. Such faces as the light revealed were white and tense and unfamiliar. The little mystic in the upper circle put his hand once again to his wet forehead with a murmur of “ I told you so ”; for she was telling of the Trend, of the cracking of



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the ice of convention, of the irresistible, belated upward rush, not of stray emotions, but of life itself. In the history of the past there had been an occasional rumble, a puff of smoke, the promise, but never the fulfilment of earthquake; now it was coming. There had been signs and portents it was impossible any longer to ignore or to explain away; spirit had whispered to spirit of the pressure in the atmosphere, of the *ennui* of the century, of the shorter and shorter period of every cult, the demand for rest, for the simple life, for the new religion. What were these but the confessions of human inadequacy to maintain any longer the pretense of accepting the existing statutes of condition? Even the physical aspect of men and women emphasized the end of the tether; nerves were giving way, not here and there, but everywhere; matter was decomposing under the onslaught of mind.

As the will of the uncertain man gave way before the will of the radiantly certain woman, so the will of the community, of which his was but



too typical, was persuaded to let go its frenzied grip of false realism, was coaxed to accept, with him, a new solution of the tangle of existence. The musical bass note blended well with that poignant, female song of victory. The pace increased as the scene was worked up with inimitable skill to its fine if vague conclusion, and, when the curtain fell, it was obvious that the gold of a great popular success had been hit. "But what did they applaud?" the young man asked himself as, dragged by Vanda to the front of the stage, he faced the ordeal of a public ovation.

Was it enlightenment or was it hypnotism? Looking from one heated face to another his inward melancholy increased. Was this the goal for which he had aimed? Was this the Nirvana of those who surrendered the essence of themselves to the cause of progression? He looked at the woman beside him, nod, nodding her blonde head in exuberant appreciation of the salvoes of a perspiring crowd. He had toiled to exalt her, and she believed herself exalted, but, in the depths



of his heart, he was setting the laurel wreath of achievement on a very different head. But that head had vanished, and nobody, save himself, appeared to remember it; nobody, at all events, raised a call for the white girl in the stained gown, and the drama moved on to its last conclusion, to that necessary last act that so rarely escapes the reproach of "bathos." But Hadden's "Sinking Ship" was floated without any such disturbing label. The charm held, and suddenly the intuition of the young dramatist yielded to it. His subjective self, attacked at a vulnerable point by this jubilant concourse of people, saw fit to collapse, and swiftly a haze spread over the theater, through which the beauty and the enthusiasm of the women, the more tempered but no less impressive approval of the men, began to shine with intoxicating effect; and, the cup of adulation once accepted, dreams, sweet and wild and seductive as those that the lotus provokes, began to wrap his tired mind in a veil of blissful lethargy.

"To supper, to supper!" was the cry of his



elated companions, and his imagination, worsted but not quite ruled into submission, found a sinister pleasure in a free translation: "To the Brocken, to the Brocken!" "to the Witches' Sabbath!" "to wine and wile!" "to serenade and sleep!" "to the breast of Venus and the feet of Circe!" "to the haunt of frailty and the bourne of force!" "to compromise, the fairyland of license, whose password is the relaxation of a single moral muscle!"



## CHAPTER X

### RIDING LIGHT

A LARGE and heterogeneous collection of persons took supper that night in Barkston Gardens, and the round table had once more been attractively decorated, on this occasion with Iceland poppies. Petals of rosy glass, scarcely to be distinguished from those of the flowers they were intended to represent, circled the electric light, and a strip of looking-glass formed an effective centerpiece, reflecting each and all of the dainty table attributes, mirroring the dishes of fruit and the gay faces of the guests.

Exuberance in every form was concentrated here, and the remainder of the room was in darkness, out of which soft-footed servants brought relays of tempting and much-needed provender.

Renshaw found himself placed between his



hostess and a little dancer, fresh from her nightly triumph at the halls, and, as Vanda was according her attention to a man of ambassadorial aspect on her other side, it was evident he was expected to devote himself to the stranger. Her first cry, however, was for caviare on toast, and, to his amusement, as well as his chagrin, she made no response whatever to his civilities until her peremptory tapping on the table brought the waiter and the champagne. Having eaten and drunk, she turned to him and shrugged a bare shoulder with what might pass for a coquettish form of apology.

“Lord, I was thirsty and hungry too. I could have eaten you five minutes ago! Finished my last show at ten o’clock, and it’s after twelve. Sole, isn’t it?”

She turned eagerly to welcome the proffered dish.

“I do wish they wouldn’t roll it up in these scrimpy bits, all sauce and decoration,” she complained. “Give me a good old fried fellow, with



his honest backbone running down his back—something to come and go upon.”

He laughed and leaned forward to examine the menu, not ill-pleased to find in her a gourmande of the frank order, and aware, now that he had a moment for consideration, that his own appetite had acquired edge.

“We’re not to come short to-night, signorina, if this program speaks the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“Signorina?” She curled a disdainful lip. “There’s nothing Italian about me, unless it’s my temper, and you can get that just as hot and a lot cheaper in Whitechapel. I’m plain Miss Grimm—Kitty to my friends, only, of course, they wouldn’t let me dance to a vulgar bit of a name like that! Salt, please—and, waiter, I’ll trouble you for some more knives. You don’t catch me chivying my food round with one hand, whether it’s fashionable or whether it isn’t. I get my clothes in Bond Street, Mr. Renshaw, but I get my manners ready-made a bit farther east, as



you'd find out for yourself if I wasn't wise enough to own up."

Again he laughed, his mood lightening further under the influence of the good food and this promise of easy intercourse.

"Tell me who we all are, Miss Kitty. I'm an outsider. There's a mixed look about us. Are we distinguished, or only rebellious?"

Her eye followed his leisurely the round of the table.

"I think we've all made something or other, money or mischief or talk. That's Lady Alice Pinder in the place of honor."

"So it is. I'm by way of knowing her, I believe. She lives next door to my people, and it's a vexed question between her and my mother who can run up the longest bill with the dressmaker; it's a still more vexed one who pays for dressing—not in the literal sense, they don't either of them do that, but in the ornamental. Personally, and quite without prejudice, I yield the palm to the mater. Does she come here much?"



"Lady Alice? Well, more than Mr. Pinder likes, they say."

"Pinder—Pinder? I can't recall a husband. One saw innumerable men on her front-door steps, but they hadn't any of 'em the look of a husband."

"He's Scotch," Miss Grimm informed him between her numerous and very large mouthfuls of chicken patty. "Real old Scotch, you know. 'Keeps the Sawbath—and anything else he can get'; but she don't seem inclined to let him keep *her* too close."

"And the worried-looking man on her other side, who can't get a word in?"

"Is O'Gorry, an Irishman, and typical again. 'Doesn't know what he wants, and won't be happy till he gets it.' He's been weighed by a good many of us and found wanting, consequently you'll always find him on the deaf side of somebody. Now with me it's the other way; I sit tight and everything comes round. I'm the seventh child of a seventh child. Hulloo!



What's this? Plovers' eggs? What did I tell you, Mr. Renshaw? Why, I could live on 'em cooked this way; and it's the same with everything," she added, peppering vigorously. "The luck's always on my side. When I was a kid I wanted to dance, and my people (drapers in Westbourne Grove; chapelites, and as starchy as they're made) said, 'Not at no price.' But, bless you, I didn't listen to 'em. I bustled round and bothered the lives out of all the agents in town, till, for peace and quietness' sake, they got me stuck on somewhere, and the rest was child's play. I wormed myself to the front by degrees; and as for mother, well, I put five shillings under her nose one Saturday night, and I've never heard no more about the damning of my soul from that day to this. Here, old man, you bring that dish back again. I wasn't shaking my head at you, but at the ways of this mercenary world."

Story obeyed with reluctance. He knew the lady well, and his most cherished dainties had



suffered punishment at her hands on many occasions.

“I’m drawing my thirty pounds a week now,” she added to her neighbor. “There’s a few done better and a lot done worse. Here’s to all the folks on top!”

Roguishly she ogled him over the edge of the glass; roguishly she looked to right and left to catch stray glances of approval from such of her male friends present as were not too engrossed to respond; but Hadden, keeping a shrewd eye on her, noted that there was one point, and one point only, towards which her bright eye never seemed to wander.

“Can you tell me the name of the gentleman to the left of us—the gentleman with the basilisk glare?”

“It’s probably Mr. Hermann Herz,” she answered after rather a prolonged pause; but still she did not look in the direction indicated.

“Do you know him?” he asked with an increase of suspicion.



“Yes; everybody knows him—everybody who is anybody,” she added a trifle maliciously. “He’s a financier—a successful financier; he has shares in pretty nearly every enterprise going, your ‘boss’s’ theater included. I expect he’s busy sizing you up at this present moment.”

“I think it’s on you that his very evil eye appears to be fixed.”

“Well, why shouldn’t it? I’m a public character. Ever seen me dance?”

“Once or twice, but——”

“But you don’t care for dancing,” she finished for him, eager to turn the point at which he aimed. “Oh, don’t trouble to tell fibs. I don’t care twopence for your long-winded dramas; I wouldn’t be paid to sit one of them out, so we’re quits; and if you’re not interested in my doings, you’re interested in me,” she added audaciously.

“Immensely interested. Tell me——”

“I’m out of your line,” she broke in hurriedly. “For one thing you’ve never met a woman with such an honest appetite.” She helped herself



liberally to trifle, and proceeded to poke her fork cautiously into it. "If I land on the ring, Mr. Renshaw, I don't know what I'll do."

"I thought the thimble was the *bête noire*."

"Good heavens! I've got it! No, it's only a macaroon! The thimble's bad, of course, but the ring's worse to the ladies of our profession. I want the sixpence. Luck, you know. And here it is!"

Triumphantly she fished out the coin from a pool of cream with her fingers, wiped it on a lace handkerchief, and dropped it down the neck of her *décolletée* gown.

"What are you laughing at? My purse? It's so handy. Everything goes in and nothing ever falls out. I'm too laced-up for that; and the odds and ends I collect in one evening would make a cat laugh. We meet queer parties, I can tell you, in our walk of life, and they give us a lot of queer presents when the wine's in and the discretion's out. Not that I'm on the cadge," she added quickly. "To tell you the truth, I've a



job to know what to do with all the rubbish I get foisted on to me. I've got family heirlooms that it would be an insult to a decent frock to wear; but mother's not so beastly particular. I wish you could see her in her Sunday rig-up; brooches as big as saucers, rings with locks of hair in 'em, miniatures of other folks' grandmothers set in paste. I can't endure paste—shoddy stuff. Now these earrings are Brazilian, cost a cool hundred, and my friend bought them in the business way, so what they'd fetch in Regent Street I'll leave you to guess."

He decided to focus his admiration on the pretty little ear she turned to him, rather than on the single stone adorning it, and Miss Kitty approved the decision.

"You do know how to make a woman purr," she observed encouragingly; "most of them lay it on with a trowel because we weren't born in the purple; won't give us credit for knowing the real thing when we see it. Paste don't deceive me, as I told you. I know when I'm being



stuffed, though it pays me now and again to pretend I don't. Sure I'm not boring you?"

"I've not been so sure of anything for twenty-four hours."

"I never! And you the man of the moment."

"Oh, please," he protested, disturbed by the shrill nature of the announcement.

"Why, there's nobody here with the face to deny it; and if you come to consider how many moments go to a day, I don't know that the compliment's altogether overwhelming."

"Then you *do* come to consider some times?"

She gave him a look compounded of suspicion and defiance.

"Why not?" she said tartly. "Considering don't cost anything."

"Are you quite sure, Miss Kitty?"

For answer she tossed her head, and with a persistency for which he was himself at a loss to account, he pressed inquiry further.

"Well, then, suppose you satisfy an ancient speculation of mine; add a dozen years to your



age and tell me——” but with a cry of dismay she interrupted him.

“Add a dozen years to my age? Never, never, never. I’m twenty-one—do you hear?—twenty-one, and I shan’t be twenty-five until the year nineteen hundred and thirty, and not then unless my tongue and my wits and everything else about me has lost its cunning.”

“Of course not. You shall be—you are Perpetua—the spirit of eternal motion, incapable of growing old or stiff. But the others? You’re the exception. But what becomes of them? I’ve often wondered. One never seems to see or hear of an elderly dancer. Where do they go to? What do they turn into?”

She drummed upon the table with her empty glass, but she was not calling for wine.

“Don’t tell me,” he resumed, fascinated by her air of subdued excitement, “that they all turn into common or garden wives and mothers. It would be such a tame finale. Carmen with a perambulator strikes me as out of the drawing.”



“ I might have known it,” she said fiercely. “ I might have known you beastly dramatists couldn’t let us alone even in play-hours. You can’t take your own meals in peace, much less let us take ours. There you go, sticking your inquisitive fingers into us to see what we’re made of, how long we’re going to last; you’ll want to know who pays for us next; and I’ll tell you nothing. So, there! ”

Viciously she snatched a peach from the basket in front of her; she began to peel it, but her hands trembled, and there was water on her dark eyelashes.

“ I’m sorry, Miss Kitty.”

“ No, you’re not, or you wouldn’t do it; at least you’re only sorry you can’t turn us all inside out for your next play.” She dropped the peach and her silver knife and fork on the top of it. She pushed her plate aside and planted her bare elbows on the table, looking sideways at him with bright, reproachful, tear-dimmed eyes.

“ You’ve spoilt my supper for me, Mr. Ren-



shaw; I couldn't eat another thing to save my life. I suppose you think we all dance to perdition, as my Aunt Betsy used to say. Well, if you'd seen our show at sale time, I bet you'd have taken the risks and cleared out too."

"Of course I should; and I don't believe in perdition."

"Don't you? That's awfully good of you. But what's the difference between perdition and extermination? You've reminded me that we all get wiped out."

"No; I only asked a question."

"A question that you knew very well couldn't have but one answer. I said I wouldn't give it; but I will after all. There's a poison," she went on with startling solemnity, "advertised to kill rats and mice, and not only to kill them, but to dispose of the carcasses. It isn't a pretty topic for a dining-room, but you would have it; it's like that with most of us; when we've done our dancing, there's so little of us left that it really doesn't matter what becomes of it. Dancing isn't



like the other arts; they're supposed to enlarge the heart or mind, or whatever the thing is that gives you a vote for eternity; but dancing enlarges nothing but your muscles. You put all your money into one stocking, or rather into two, and when they're worn through the bank bursts and there's an end of you. I don't know that Aunt Betsy was far out after all."

The ruling passion threatened to keep his pity at bay, though he spoke more softly, more apologetically. "You mean a dancer must be light?"

"The lighter she is the longer she lasts."

"And a single dark thought," he persisted, "would be dangerous to her existence? Is there a dark thought in your mind, Miss Kitty?"

"No," she said with violence; "I'm not such a fool as to let it in."

"A dark thought," he repeated slowly, his eye roving to the far side of the table, "a dark thought—a dark man whom it's inadvisable to notice; the dark man who steals like a thief and lays a finger on one's heart so that it weighs heavy.



I see, I see; so that's the reason you look all ways but one. Wise little Kitty to keep the financier safely outside. But tell me one thing more."

"Yes," she broke in with a change of aspect, a lightening of mood, "I'll tell you one thing more and only one; he doesn't know he's outside, and as long as he doesn't know it's all right; he thinks he's in the heart of the city, such heart as it possesses. He's moving now; he coming up to take his evening stroll in it. You'll have to make yourself scarce."

As she spoke the young Jew leaned over them from behind, and Hadden involuntarily rose in answer to his affable words of greeting.

Others were on the move; chairs were pushed back or vacated. It was evident that smoke and relaxation were to be introduced. The room had been arranged with attention to the claims of dual privacy; seats in couples placed temptingly, discreetly.

Certain of the guests remained at the table, Lady Alice among them, and, to Hadden's sur-



prise, she favored him with an unmistakable invitation to approach her. Vanda, standing just behind, busy with the lighting of a cigarette, smiled down on them, seeming to listen absently to her friend's overtures.

The young man was reminded tactfully of old acquaintance, congratulated gracefully on his emancipation from what was termed "our elegant treadmill." Lady Alice was handsome, of the massive order, and, when it suited her, she could be charming. She seemed to know by instinct precisely what tactics would appeal to her audience, and she proceeded to dose this new and promising recruit to fortune with flattery of the kind best suited to a juvenile and yet fastidious palate.

More than once she exchanged a covert glance of amusement with Vanda, for he was presently dancing to her subtle pipe with every evidence of satisfaction. He was no match for the two women, one active, one passive, both equally bent on turning his by no means too steady head. Be-



tween them they reinvoked the atmosphere of the theater—the moment when his senses had succumbed. Again he saw the faces of gay and beautiful women through the veil that kept crudity at bay; again his eye was wooed by color, by scent; again he was a lotus-dreamer of the East, sinking yet deeper than before into the luxury of self-forgetfulness; conscience and consciousness alike grew faint and his old enemy ceased to trouble and inflame. To sweet music he reapproached a state of intoxication, but failed to enter it, for intervention, as sudden as it was simple, came from an unexpected quarter. A draught of cool and pure night air pierced the atmosphere, cutting its keen way to his dull senses through smoke and patchouli. Lady Alice had turned her head to whisper to her hostess—a tale just a degree too spicy for the masculine ear—and on an impulse he could neither analyze nor disobey, he sprang to his feet, muttering incoherently of the heat, of headache, of a need to follow this inciting, invisible messenger to the window.



It stood ajar, and in the gloom of the balcony he could discern the outline of the person who had taken shelter there. His mind was not sufficiently alert to whisper of definite expectation or occult influence. If a counter-spell had been employed his subservience to it was already on the wane, for he joined her with an air of swaggering indifference.

“Is it permitted to bring smoke into this—this superior region?” But, as once before, his grandiloquence, ignored by her simplicity, appeared to strike back upon himself with unpleasant force.

“Of course; mother allows smoke everywhere.”

She moved, however, to make room on the seat beside her, though he feigned not to note the invitation, and established himself on the iron railing of the balcony, from which position it was possible to look down on her or back into the illuminated room from which he had made so undignified and inexplicable an escape.



## CHAPTER XI

### THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

“Too hot for you inside?”

“It’s nicer here.”

“Infinitely nicer,” he replied, cudgeling his brains for a form of intercourse that should satisfy both his curiosity and the self-esteem she invariably contrived to ruffle.

The man of the moment was not to be defrauded of the pleasure of that moment; she must be persuaded to throw her handful of incense along with the rest or give a satisfactory reason for refusal, and the only satisfactory reason he could sight was her mental limitation.

“Miss Conquest—Miss Sibyl—I came out to—to offer my congratulations. There were moments—I can assure you honestly there were moments when your performance struck me as really



remarkable." He paused to enjoy a modest disclaimer, but she made no response whatever, and he went on less suavely.

"It was so remarkable that I'm tempted to ask you bluntly what you were up to?"

"What makes you think I was up to anything?"

The embarrassment was his, and he looked away back into the room he had left, trying to distinguish certain of the figures in it through the thick columns of smoke in which it was now enveloped.

"Your stock," he replied at length, with the violence of one at a disadvantage.

Why couldn't she take offense? Why did she sit so abnormally still? Why couldn't she wriggle or twist those passive hands lying in her lap? Why did she look at him with such intensity?

"It's quite certain," he added, with an effort after a lighter tone, "that you and I are not of one mind. You don't seem inclined to take an interest in the workings of mine, so it only remains



for me to investigate the workings of yours. If you'll allow me I'll come and sit beside you. At the present moment I'm trying to look two ways at once."

She moved her white skirts an inch or two, and, throwing the remnant of his cigarette into the street below, he took the new place.

"That's better," he remarked. "I've been trying to keep one eye on our lively friends in there, and the other on you, with the result that I can't take fair stock of either party."

A silence supervened. After a few seconds his eye, growing accustomed to the darkness, could single out of it the shapes of the trees in the square garden. He was not sure, however, that his change of position was to prove beneficial. He found more difficulty than ever in attacking, much less dispelling, her detestable serenity.

"The thoughts of youth," he ventured mockingly, "are long, long thoughts. Do you ever trust any one with yours?"

"Am I to trust you?"



“I’m a dramatist—at least I suppose I shall be by to-morrow. You might do worse.”

“But would the tale be exciting enough for the British public, Mr. Renshaw?”

“Depends how it is told. One would have to embroider a bit. But I’m convinced something could be made of your talents. One day soon I shall write you a curtain-raiser.”

“Thank you.” Her apathy was not to be ignored, but he found a translation acceptable to his vanity.

“Poor child! You’re dead beat, aren’t you, after all those interminable rehearsals? Thank heaven they’re things of the past. Thank heaven for this cool and delightful balcony. What a night, or rather, what a morning, and what a pity one always has to go to bed just when nature is at her loveliest. Look at that sky splashed pink and gold. If I were a free agent I’d stretch a hammock under the trees down there and sleep to the rustle of their million leaves. Yes, I’m serious, Miss Sibyl; I’m a ‘lover of trees,’ and my ghost



will certainly walk in pursuit of them. I'd a hope," he added ingratiatingly, "that yours might be willing to accompany me. This garden now. You've looked down into it all your life—all your lonely, innocent child-life."

Surely, he thought, this suggestion must arouse the sentimental instinct, the instinct that should connect her with her kind, dis sever her from this attitude of detachment he feared and distrusted.

"A lonely child? I was never that. What makes you think so?"

With an effort he concealed his disappointment, preserved something of the romantic inflection in his voice.

"Perhaps because I was such a lonely little beggar myself. Not that I complain; brothers and sisters have plenty of disadvantages. I doubt if I should have written a line if I'd been one of seven. I should have been compelled to attend to my material interests instead of poking my speculative nose into the moss to find the trail of the elusive but seductive fairy."



"You believe in fairies, Mr. Renshaw?"

"Don't you?"

"I don't know anything about them."

"Then if you can't see the supernatural, and you won't see the natural"—he jerked a thumb over his shoulder—"it appears to me that you're left with rather a limited view, unless so be that you're a sphinx—a stone thing, you know, that spends its time staring out into the desert, and thinking of all the good times it had a thousand years ago."

"No, I'm not a sphinx," she told him gravely.

"My good times will never turn to stone."

Again he fell to silence, and presently he found a species of assault more compatible with his true dignity than any he had yet chanced upon.

"Shall I own that I can't diagnose you properly, and that my failure is irritating me?"

"I'm ready to answer any question, Mr. Renshaw."

"Then tell me what you were trying to do with that little Winifred of mine to-night?"



"I was trying to bring out the life in her."

"But she hasn't any."

"She's as much, exactly as much, as I have."

"You?" he stammered. "What and who are you to talk so boldly of life?"

"Don't you know *who* and *what* I am?"

"You're a very beautiful girl," he said, carried yet further from the region of self-control by the strange look of her; but she leaned suddenly away from him, her eyes dilating with horror.

"No—no; not that," she whispered.

"Then a most impossible girl," he declared with vehemence. "A veritable figure-head for contradiction and chaos. You're not a play-actress, you're a siren, not a woman. What remains? A creature that can't live on land and dies in the water. I was a fool to follow you."

"You can go back."

"I can't, and you know it. You're in the proud position of being undiscovered country, and I'm in the detestable one of a discoverer who has



sighted new land and can't find a way into the harbor."

"You can't go back," she said, and for the first time he saw the light of ecstasy in her brown eyes. "You can't go back; then you'll have to come on."

She laid a hand upon his arm, and he became aware of a current, he could only liken to electricity, running upwards towards the center of his emotional system.

"Where do I come to?" he asked feebly, almost childishly.

"Think, and you'll remember."

"I *am* thinking, and I can't. Sibyl, be merciful. See, I'm not posing any longer. I'm giving up my prejudices; I'm giving up my friends. I'm in deadly earnest now. The puzzle is beginning to obsess. Where do you take me? Where do you come from? Where do you go to when the talk down here doesn't please you? Whom do you look at with that soft, far look to the right or the left? Who is the friend at court?"



“Think, only think, and you’ll remember.”

“Remember? What? Is it an old friend of mine?”

“The oldest and the best. But you’re not looking in the right direction. Don’t look at me, look towards the east; breathe slowly, breathe in the magic of this summer night and you’ll remember.”

“Magic!” he echoed, but she shook her head.

“I shouldn’t have said that; magic is the wrong word—at least it has been used wrong. It has come to mean black magic, and mine is white.”

“We’re mad!” he said with sudden impatience. “That’s the answer to the riddle—madness. We’ll cover our disgrace with fine names though. I’m a genius and you’re a—a Joan of Arc.”

“No; the others are mad. Listen to them, look at them, and look at me.”

“You told me not to look at you, Sibyl, and



you were wiser then. When I look at you this solid universe begins to rock; you're too strong or too strange for me and my education. You're cutting me off from my old points of view; you've done it before. To-night, a few hours ago, you were at work undermining. There was a wheel within a wheel, as I suspected. I can feel the pitiless whirr of it now up my arm. She and I wanted to go one way and you wanted to go—you went—the other. And you must explain; there's a limit to the claims of mystery, and you have passed it. Will you never speak? You've taken everything; will you give nothing in exchange? There's a door, here, under my fingers and I can't find the catch; you must open it."

"Hadden, dear Hadden!"

He had heard his name uttered in many tender variations of tone, but in none quite like this. He flushed and paled again; a fine instinct started up, stood at attention, dropped inert, for, swift upon its track, there came a coarser one, a giant figure,



product of the night and its egotistical influence. The door was open—a *door*, at all events, was open. He loved her; it was the commonest secret in the world.

“So it was love, Sibyl; and to think that I should be so slow to guess. But that was your fault; you would give me none of the signs, though you were netted, from the very first, as surely as myself. None but a lover could have said my name that way. You love me; but where are you going to with all that love? Why do you still look away? What does it mean this—this last evasion of the natural law?”

“It means,” she answered with evident difficulty, “that I’m trying, just for a minute, to do what you tried to do—to look two ways at once; but I mustn’t, I daren’t, I won’t.”

“No, indeed. You’re to look my way, now and always. Dare you say that you don’t love me?”

“I love you dearly!”

“Ah, that’s all to matter.”



"No."

"No?" he repeated with tender mockery.

"Love—your sort of love—isn't everything," she said quickly, as though she feared an interruption. "It's hardly anything except, perhaps, a ladder."

"Sibyl!"

"Hush! You've got to listen. You've come far, but you must come much farther."

"No," he said with passion; "I'll come no farther in that profitless direction. Love as it stands is quite fantastic enough for me. I'm not going to gild a lily of that type. I love you! I tried to look over your dear head; I tried, like a little boy at a first party, to dance with somebody less simple, less guileless and less good, but Fate wasn't to be outwitted in that fashion. Here I am, a blind man led by the faithful dog of instinct, beside you, at your feet. I want you, Sibyl, I want you; I've always wanted you, always hunted you, little friend and teacher and wife."



“And are you free to hunt me, to take me, Hadden Renshaw?”

Involuntarily he shrank under the reproach of her dark eyes.

“Free? What do you mean? Do you think—do you dare to think I’d come to you if—if I were not?”

“You didn’t mean to come,” she reminded him; “you didn’t want to come. This love that you talk so proudly of was the last thing you meant to offer me.”

“I swear——” but he got no farther. Sensitive as he was to expression, it was impossible for him to ignore or to mistake the meaning of hers. Like a harp beneath the fingers of a rough hand, her whole delicate personality seemed to vibrate in tremulous disclaimer of the oath he would have offered.

“Sibyl, Sibyl!” he began once more in a voice compounded of protest and apology. “I know, dimly I know, there’s a code you don’t consider, and another that you’re going to try and compel



me to take into account; but it's too absurd. You're thinking of my promise to her. She told you. No, she could never have told you; you've guessed it; but you haven't guessed that it's very different from the one I make to you. You're putting a quite incorrect and romantic value on a boy's first, wild fancy for, not a woman, but a great artist. If she told you anything of this——"

"She's told me nothing," the girl interrupted sharply; "there's no need. I haven't your wisdom, and I haven't hers; but I've other wisdom, Hadden, and I know that you've given her something that you can't take away like this and hand on to me; it's hers by law, by *my* law, until of her own free will she gives it back to you."

"Gives it back," he groaned. "Do these painted women give anything back so long as there's a pennyworth of profit in it? Oh, I'm a brute to turn like this on the hand I've fawned upon; but if you knew, if you only knew, the height from which I've toppled to-night; if you



only guessed what an unholy bargain it is to which you talk so prettily of tying me."

"We'll make it holy."

So curious and exalted was her look that, for a full minute, he could find no kind of contradiction.

"You're an idealist," he said at last, but in futile fashion. "You'd put a coat of virtue on to anything, however base; but it wouldn't stay there long. Why can't you show discrimination? Why can't you be content to exercise your faculty in a fair field? My love's a fair field enough. I—I'd come a long way to meet your fancies. I belong to them. I see you, like a princess in a high prison tower, calling, out of darkness, for rescue, for love and life; and I ride through dangers innumerable to the foot of the tower, and you let down your hair and I bury my face in it, and all the sweet lost memories and beliefs of my childhood come back to me in the scent of it, and all the happiness and the hope that I so nearly sold to Delilah; and then you draw the sacred stuff



away, and you bid me go. Is it kind, little princess; is it fair? These stories ought to have a happy ending."

"We're not in fable-land."

"No; I forgot," he broke in roughly; "and you don't believe in the doll, the sphinx, or the fairy."

"Because I've something finer to believe in. The doll is stuffed with sawdust, the sphinx hasn't any stuffing at all, and the fairy is capricious, she turns the prince into a toad sometimes. Think of somebody who only turns the toads into princes."

"The problem is too wide even for my adventurous imagination."

"Poor boy! To have seen so much and never to have seen the angel."



## CHAPTER XII

### “ALMOST THOU PERSUADEST ME”

It was assuredly the last answer he had expected.

“Religion,” he said, as soon as he had got his breath, “religion in this house, of all unlikely places! Well, go on, tell me of the God who walks in your garden there at eventide, spite of the Cockney nursemaid.”

“You can tell yourself all that you care to know.”

“Oh, I can tell myself the stock legends, of course; and I’ll allow them to be dramatic. The Bible’s too well and too diversely written ever to be relegated to the shelf; but it’s also too full of contradictory statements quite to satisfy one’s reason.”

He stopped, aware that her attention had



strayed from him. With her head against the back of the seat, she was gazing up into the vast blue dome above them, at the stars, pale in the light of the coming day.

“A nun,” he sneered in desperation, “or more probably her stage counterpart. Here, it seems, is the play-actress breaking out at the one and only spot left unexploited. Vanda has familiarized us with all the rôles but this; this has been overlooked; and—there’s money in it, or what amounts to the same thing, there’s power. Witness my discomfiture. I’m hot and you’re cool. Still, don’t fancy I’m owning up to defeat. I’m not beaten yet. By hook or by crook I mean to get into this city of reserve and mystery. The guns are big, but I’m determined to prove them property guns. It’s useless to point them at me; it’s useless to declaim the familiar ‘die villain!’ of melodrama; you must substantiate this boast of superiority. There’s a goodly array of philosophers and scientists to sweep out of the way to begin with.”



"Each sweeps the other out," she returned calmly, "and even the boldest of them doesn't begin his argument at the beginning or carry it to the end; they build colleges and technical schools, but they don't build houses of God; they teach earth knowledge, and the other knowledge gets pushed out."

"But what is this other knowledge? Your line's too vague for the normal intellect to follow, much less attack."

"Leave what you call the normal intellect behind; leave argument behind; 'be still, and know that I am God.'"

Silenced, awed by the intensity of her aspect, he became the prey of a notion more disturbing than any that had gone before. It seemed to his inflamed imagination that she was creating—had, indeed, already created—a zone of atmosphere free of all egotistical feeling, and that in this zone some force invisible was about to manifest; it was as though her passive frame were being yielded to the majestic influence of the night



for the purpose of supernatural demonstration.

“The Bible again,” he scoffed. “A fine and a cryptic utterance; but there’s nothing proven. We’re bombarded with these phrases; we’re intoxicated by tales of jugglery until we forget natural law. Here’s a bush on fire and here’s a rock full of water. We’re worsted by quantity of adventure, not by quality or veracity. It’s that insatiable demand in us for the impossible, it’s the cry for miracle, that makes us the all too willing victims of chicanery.”

“You think—you really think the miracles are over? No; you think they never happened at all?”

“I accept a symbolical value in the story of them.”

“The water never turned to wine?”

“I fancy, if history were sifted carefully, we should find it wine in the beginning.”

“And the blind, the sick, the lame, never touched the hem of Christ’s garment and were healed?”



"They were healed, doubtless, of hysterical tendencies."

"Poor boy!" she murmured as before, and as before her face quivered as at a cruel touch.

"I lay the curse of poverty elsewhere," he broke out angrily. "If I speak contemptuously of the figure of your idolatry, it's because I've seen blood spilt over it; I've seen good men ruined by fanaticism and superstition. Credulity such as yours is gas; it can't make any definite mark; it's not independent for one thing. You listen to the music of the spheres, which, being interpreted, would prove about as instructive and practical as the gabble of the 'bandar-log'; but you always come down for meals; you're fed by the government you want to betray; the animal preservation of life counts first with you as with the rest of us."

"I can't find the answer to that," she said, but without a trace of discomfiture; "it's there, but I can't find the words for it. I only know that what you want to call credulity is faith,



and that life, eternal life, is inseparable from it.”

“Then remove the mountain, Sibyl. Prove the value of this high-sounding creed. You love me and I love you. It’s a love, moreover, founded on all that’s best in human nature.”

“I know, I know; but we can’t take it this way.”

“Then show me a way in which it can be taken.”

“I’m trying to, but you’re so slow, so obstinate. Don’t you see that you must let go my hand if—if you would keep my heart?”

“Good Lord! The looking-glass theory with a vengeance; sacrifice for the mere drear love of mutilation. I’m to let go your hand and hold on to hers because (believing it the hand of abstract and maligned womanhood) I set my first kiss on it. Have you forgotten, child of romance, that she has a husband?”

“No, Hadden, she’s nothing, nothing in all the world but the one wonderful thought that we,



the young, are true to her; the wonderful thought that she isn't a doomed ship, and we the rats that run from it to find luxury and life elsewhere. Why do you frown and fight? Why won't you believe what I tell you—what you have often told yourself in the long-ago? Do I look madder than those poor people in the room behind?"

"No," he said uncertainly; "but that's the pull of youth. You haven't been knocked about yet."

"I never shall be knocked about. You know it. You run away from the conviction, but you always come back again. You want the secret of my peace, the secret of my strength, and you'll know no rest till you get it. I'm not a girl, young and pretty, to be dressed up and taken to church and to court, and perhaps to the Continent, to be treated as an appendage to your career. I've a career of my own. I'm a power, part of a power, that is; I'm in harmony with all this," she turned her head slowly, seeming to exhale the fragrance



and the majesty of the night. “You laugh at the thought of religion in this house; but do you think—oh, do you really think there’s any house into which knowledge cannot come? I think the pity of God sends it to the dark houses first of all. I know it came to this—to me—when I was so little I could scarcely lisp my prayers. The sense came before the words. There was no one to interfere, no one to teach me wrong; I was what the world would call a lonely child. Not a human soul, save a careless nursery governess, ever came over the boundary fence of familiarity. I was free from the common earth-pressure. There was only my will to suppress; and to yield it each day, each hour, to the great Spirit of Omnipotence became easier and easier; one gave so little and took so much; lost the cheap life and gained the priceless one. More and more freely the power worked, until—until I seemed to walk upon the water; I touched the brown staff and it put forth buds; over and over again the impossible (as the others called it) became the possible,



and I saw miracle, the lost age of miracle, blooming again."

"Second sight?" he suggested, but not with much conviction.

"No; yours, theirs, is the second sight; this is the first. Come near, look close at me, for it's all true. I'm real, that is I'm a part of the great reality that habit has disturbed. You can't turn my will or take it, for it's a city of utter faith; your own must turn if we're ever to join hands. I'm a maze, Hadden, and there's only one way by which you can get out at the point you want. You call it the looking-glass theory; you don't like it; you haven't proved it times and times over as I have; but, couldn't you trust me? Wise men have been led by children before now. It's a fever-dream, I tell you, the life you try to live with those poor people in there; couldn't you agree to let it go? They strive and strive, and you know in your heart of hearts that they end in nothing, that when trouble comes they fall to pieces; they shriek for us or else for anæsthetics. You'll have



to come my way in the end. Why can't you take it while you've still something to give in exchange for immortality? You're not mean, you're not a coward, and you've put on hand on the plow more than once. Are you going back?"

"I—I scarcely know. I feel inclined to say with Agrippa, 'almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.'"

She cried out in a rapture and laid hands on him again.

"I knew it. You've seen the fairy, and out of the fairy comes the angel, and out of the angel comes slowly, slowly, the consciousness of God, the craving for God."

"I'm afraid you go too fast. I said 'almost,' Sibyl, and I shouldn't like to decide how much of this qualified surrender was due to your personality. Remember, please, that you're a beautiful young woman in a most becoming frame, and beauty, mere physical beauty, is a drug I've been taking in pretty stiff doses of late. You shall tie your handkerchief over my eyes, but remember



that it is *your* handkerchief and responsibility into the bargain. I'll vouch for nothing in the way of consequences. I've been turned round so many times by so many people during the last weeks that I've but a vague notion as to where I stand, or if I stand at all. You conquer to this extent. I commit myself to you; you commit me to the mercy of the unknown spirit of this balcony, and our ultimate relation to one another lies on the knees of a very strange and indefinite God. The situation stands over. I've certainly not forced my way, and you haven't established yours. As to detail, I take it I'm to go on writing round the lady of my late idolatry; I'm to lunch with her, to talk to her as improvingly as may be; but what are we to talk about? She wouldn't stand this, you know."

"Why not? You've stood it."

"Yes, because you exert an influence over me."

"And you exert a much bigger influence over her."

"Y—yes," he agreed doubtfully; "but it isn't



the same kind; and there's her counter-influence over me to consider. She treats me to Tokay, Sibyl, and cigarettes of a peculiar flavor, and tea-gowns that change color as you look at them, and ideas that do very much the same; there's an aroma, too, in her sanctum that affects the senses in a dangerous fashion. I doubt if it will allow me to keep to the point, to your point, for long at a time. There are others, you know, you most adorable fanatic, and one of them is getting its claws into me now. Give me your hand again. There, I've taken it. How soft it is; how like the usual pliant, female hand! Who'd think there was so much steel behind the velvet? Sibyl, Sibyl, have you ever thought of the parts you haven't played, the parts for which you're so perfectly designed—wife and mother? I'm not arbitrary; I'd come a good half-way and more to meet those fine but rather fantastic ideas of yours. Compromise, Sibyl; come and build a house with me, such a house as the century has never seen. We could, we must, we will!” The whisper, tense



with passion, seemed to echo on the silence. Her face was averted, inscrutable; sideways she looked into the darkness, and the latch of the window rattled.

“They’re coming!” he said with desperation. “Give me an answer.”

“No.” He let the limp hand fall. He spoke with quite a creditable air of equanimity.

“It’s your hour, my dear, and from an artistic point of view you’re right not to spoil it. Still, I can’t disassociate my mind from an ugly memory.” He threw a glance over his shoulder, but the hand upon the window seemed to wait his pleasure. “The memory of a lion-tamer who brought his beasts to what appeared the perfection of docility and was eaten up at one unfortunate moment when caution was napping. I’m afraid you’re blissfully ignorant of the ingredients that go to the nature of the lion. I should be sorry to eat anybody up, and more sorry still to be eaten up myself; but I warn you there’s a fair chance of one of these accidents happening; I



warn you that it's fire we're going to tamper with.”

“And I tell you again that fire and water and all the elements are only dangerous to the *human* will, the will that says, I want this, I choose that, I claim the other. Let her come near, the nearer the better.”

“She's coming now,” he broke in resignedly. “Talk of preaching to the wild birds, it was child's play to the task you set me.” He rose, for Vanda herself was at his elbow, looking from him to his companion with observant eyes.

“You naughty children,” she exclaimed, in her most purring note. “What are you doing here in this nasty, draughty place? Rodney, tell me.” She turned to the man behind—her neighbor at the supper-table. “Is there mischief in the air or only a surfeit of oxygen?”

“I've so little acquaintance with both commodities that I hesitate to offer an opinion.”

“Nonsense,” she laughed, but with an undercurrent of insistence; “what you don't know



about mischief isn't worth knowing. Exert yourself, if you please; explain this atmosphere, for it's beyond me."

"Exactly," he replied, removing the tip of his cigar with deliberation; "it's beyond us, my dear friend. We should have come out five minutes sooner if we meant to cope with it. Whatever it may or may not signify, it's now too thoroughly established for interference. In my profession the first lesson we learn is the art of sparing our faculties unnecessary labor. Mr. Renshaw, can you oblige me with a light?"

Hadden did more; he held the match to the gentleman's cigar. It threw a glow over the handsome, cynical face, over the discreetly lowered eyelids, behind which the young man could not but suspect laughter and contempt. Vanda was smiling too when he turned to take a rather abrupt leave of her.

"Sleep well," she said, "in your room under the stars. Dream for the last time that you're still a nobody. In another eight hours your name



will be on every tongue; you'll tap on every fashionable door in London and go in with the tea and the hot water. This is fame, Hadden, and it isn't a dead-sea fruit by any means. Some folks will tell you that it is, but be very sure they haven't tasted it; the grapes were sour because they hung too high.”



## CHAPTER XIII

### DAY-DREAMING AND DIVORCE

VANDA lay in her hammock in the garden of her cottage on the Thames. It was Sunday, the day following the new production, and content, as near supreme as any she could conceive of, lapped her senses in luxury. The thermometer registered eighty-one in the shade, but it was a royal shade; the branches of the giant sycamore spread, fan-like, between her and the sun; the river at her feet kept up a ceaseless and a soothing murmur; at intervals a light wind rustled across the garden like a perfumed lady in a silken gown. She could have slept, but she played with the notion, unwilling to let go of this sweet consciousness that filled her veins.

All things took gracious color under the dual influences of memory and expectation, and look



where she might it was to see a glorified image of herself. Even the boat moored on the far side of the water, some fifty yards down stream, failed to suggest enmity. That white figure of a girl that it contained harmonized, for once, with her dreams and aims. Had she not flung, like the boy-champion, her all into the stock-pot of another's welfare? A thrill of gratitude stirred gave birth to feeble progeny; some day (the date was left pleasantly vague), but some day she, Vanda, would build for these two a cabin at her gate. Dependents on her bounty, joint-devotees at her shrine, it might be possible, desirable even, to cement what she complacently called their exuberant interest in herself and their tempered interest in one another into a mold matrimonial. Her mind, surfeited with complacency, could propound a policy of "so far and no farther" with but little difficulty.

In spite, however, of her efforts to keep a material hold upon sensation, the garden began to lose its definite lines, and she was borne, by slow



and luxurious degrees, down and back into that other fabled garden where the first woman reigned alone. Member by member her form was remolded to the pattern of its lost perfection; white and strong, wrapped only in the fluttering mantle of her hair, she stood at gaze, and, once again, her eye, turn whither it would, could find no trace of dissolution and decay. A silver veil, fine as the web of a spider, seemed to envelop land and sky, softening their crudities of color, and the green earth; there was dew on the petal of each flower; there was pulsing life in the brown earth under her feet; in the air, in the water and in her person the spirits of health and gaiety played at will, linking the animate in nature to the inanimate, knitting the strands of harmony that the age of civilization had so wantonly sundered. The lamb, a white fleck of innocence, lay down with the wolf; in the blue ether rocked the eagle and the dove in mutual bliss; in the swelling heart desire labored towards the apex of the great mountain of ecstasy; but, as in some haunted



house, a deed of evil is repeated or reflected, so here, the reopening gate of Paradise exposed the outline of a flaming sword. Once more a single human will was set face to face with temptation; once more the universe was offered to war and the long humors of war, to folly and fiction, to false gods and prophets, to wickedness in high places and low; and once more that will succumbed; there was a roar as of many waters, the roar of outraged millions seeming to leap in a frenzy of reproach on the betrayer, and with a shriek of her own the dreamer woke and stretched imploring hands towards the very rock on which her divinity had been wrecked, towards the false conditions of her century and her choice. Oh, the relief to inhale the scent of stocks, to hear a bee scold from the meshes of the hammock, in which his sticky wings had been prisoned; oh, the blessed relief of finding, not a dozen yards away, the calm, handsome face of a companion in delusion.

“Adrian, you’re good to look at. Did I call



out? It was a nightmare—well, a daymare. Drive it away! Talk, talk fast! talk of the world, the good, sound world we live in. That's a Sunday paper under your arm. Tell me we struck oil last night."

"Oil!" he said, with reassuring gaiety. "The widow's cruse isn't in it."

"Read, read!" But he paused to settle himself into the wicker chair beside her, to dispose a cushion behind his head.

"All in good time, you most excitable of women. I'll skip the usual panegyrics and start with the feather that very nearly knocked me down."

"What do you mean?"

"That my battle with your respected mother was not fought in vain."

"What do you mean?" she said again, the terror creeping back into her face and voice.

"'Miss Sibyl Conquest,'" he read aloud, by way of answer, "'makes her *début* in Mr. Renshaw's play, and, though she has been provided



with the flimsiest of parts, she contrives to make a mark in it. Were it the ordinary mark of the ordinary, pretty, little aspirant to public favor, we should dispose of it in the usual manner, with a gracious word or two of encouragement; but it was, to our thinking, a very far from common mark; it was, in fact, so uncommon as to stand outside the range of general criticism. Mr. Renshaw has aimed high, but, if our perceptions be not grossly at fault, Miss Conquest has aimed yet higher. Space does not permit us to define very exactly the nature of her influence, and we content ourselves for the present with the following simile. The ship that our new dramatist presented with such consummate skill and rescued with so much subtlety and eloquence, seemed, at the moment of deliverance, to belch forth a fleet of little boats, and it is with the fortune of these same little boats that public interest will, ere long, be involved.' There, what do you say to that?"

"I say it's written by a person of an imaginative turn of mind."



"It's written by an outsider," he remarked in apparent disregard of her growing agitation.

"He's been turned on, Lawson tells me, owing to the illness of their stock critic, and he's a crank, of course, but—his crankiness may be profitable."

"You think," she said with ominous calm, "that Sibyl is all that?"

"It pays me to think it. It always pays to have a bulwark behind one's experiments. You, my dear, who take such pleasure in looking ahead, ought to appreciate the fellow's fancy notion even more than I'm disposed to do."

"You mean, Adrian, that the play was only a *succès fou*; that it will run a season, and that then—then we must look to Sibyl for protection?"

He tipped his straw hat sideways, evincing a little discomfort; he looked out under the brim of it towards the boat, half hidden by the drooping branches of a willow-tree.

"It's difficult quite to gauge the value of even a most successful production. The fireworks went off all right; but fireworks are apt to pall



after a time, and very possibly our public will demand a new species of tonic, something a trifle less heady."

"I see." She spoke with treacherous amiability of accent. "But suppose you hand me down in response to this demand, are you quite sure Sibyl is ready to fill my place?"

"My dear, there's no question of handing down and up. Don't tell me you're jealous of that kid."

"The outsider doesn't regard her as a kid."

"So much the better," he insisted. "Personally I see no more in her than a pretty and demure piece of goods, but I'm not such a fool as to say so in face of this counter-suggestion, in which there's money, or the promise of money. She must be educated, taught her value; that young man must be persuaded to write round her a bit. I'll talk to them both to-day. Where is he, by-the-bye? Thought he spoke of running down."

"He did, but he spoke of a tramp through the country first. He'll turn up later—at tea-time



most probably. Still, you can tackle Sibyl. She's over there in the boat, dreaming, maybe, of worlds to conquer. Take her down the river for the day. I want to be alone. No, I'm not jealous—at least not to the extent that you suppose. I shan't interfere with Sibyl's education, or your advice to Hadden; but there's something—one question—before you go."

"Yes?" he queried idly.

"I've tried to put it more than once, Adrian, and I haven't dared. You'll be certain to evade it now; you'll say it's too hot to find the answer. But I've waited twenty years."

"Then an extra twenty-four hours can't signify. Wait on till the thermometer goes down."

"No. It was here, by this river, that you spoke to me. There was this same monotonous lap of the water; and I thought then that it seemed a mockery of your eloquence, for you were eloquent, Adrian. Strange and lovely spirits rose under the magic of your words. Tell me, tell me, that you cared, that they came from



your heart, that you *had* a heart in those far-away days. No, don't smile at me, don't stroke me, don't put me off with pleasant, ambiguous phrases; tell me the truth, for in my mind to-day there's a hideous doubt, the shadow of a hideous wrong. I'm not talking of the present, I'm talking of the past, of that night when you whispered the momentous question, and I wavered and looked away, and thought of my two wooers, and took them both, and was true to them, in spite of all tradition tells of the impossible. Did you love the girl, or did you want the rising actress? That's the question, the tormenting question, I've never dared to put before. What did you give me, Adrian, in exchange for my great love?"

"I gave you all I had to give, Vanda." He spoke with rare gravity, and she shivered, hiding her face an instant in her long, trembling hands.

"Oh," she said faintly, "here's the truth at last. A ring, only a ring. No wonder the house rocks, no wonder the rain comes in. It's the truth, but it isn't the whole truth, and now I must



have the rest. See, I'm quite calm; I won't make a scene; where would be the use? You don't accept scenes or anything else that's expensive to comfort. Tell me the story, the story of your death. You must have been very young; you were scarcely thirty when you came to me with that mock tale of devotion. Tell me her name; it isn't much to ask in exchange for all my sweet delusions."

"Her name," he said, still with that unfamiliar air of gravity. "She had so many, Vanda. I'll find one or two if you insist."

"Then you own that once you were alive."

"I was very much alive."

"Stage stock," she prompted, for he seemed to sink into a melancholy reverie. "You've told me of your mother, an inflammation imprisoned in a Rubens frame, out of which she made much capital; your father was an opera singer, died in the very act of conducting Faust to the lower regions. I should have thought a boy, a healthy, handsome, English boy, would have rebelled at



the lines in which his lot had fallen, would have broken out into new and sounder country."

"I *did* rebel, but circumstances were a bit too strong. I was thrown to—would it be ultra-theatrical to say the lions? when I was too young to discriminate between milk-teeth and the dangerous molar. I was a child when I was first set to play boy-lover to all sorts and conditions of women. At sixteen or thereabouts I passed from the credulous, idolatrous state to the chivalrous. I recognized a call for protection behind the insinuating plaint of my heroine. I warred for a period against the brutality of my own sex on behalf of the martyr whose blood cried out so very tunefully for vengeance. Unlimited must have been the amusement that this ingenious attitude provoked. I thought it fine and suitable that the ring of steel should encircle every head of a certain shape and an uncertain age, and only when my confidence had been imposed upon times innumerable and ways damnable, did the optimism drop a peg or two. Only under the continual



pressure of coquetry, intrigue and treachery did I yield up the ghost of that condition you still seem disposed to christen life. Her name? Dear friend," he went on with rare excitement, "she was hydra-headed; she was a Bohemian, which signified she was free to eat her cake and claim it; she was a child, which signified she might handle pitch and prate of undefilement; she was a Catholic, which signified she could afford to indulge in expensive crimes. Oh, call me an unfortunate if you like, but I tell you, Vanda, that I had no choice; I was compelled to live on their husks or starve; there was no bread within reach. A dead man? yes; but I didn't die at my own hands."

"There was fame," she whispered, but he laughed mirthlessly.

"That platitude! that ladder shooting up into the clouds! I wonder how often I scaled it, and how often I came down to start again, and yet again, always with less luggage, until every vestige of my faith had been sacrificed, and,



light as the proverbial feather, I stood on the summit of Olympus and took cool stock of my fellow-adventurers. Good Lord, what a company!—city promoters, effete musicians, performing apes. What a tussle, for what an end! There wasn't even the satisfaction of feeling one had fought a good fight. It was a bad fight, a mean fight, a sniffing, hit-below-the-belt fight, and one sat on top panting from the demoralizing effects of it. The gates of what the folks downstairs had chosen to call success had been guarded, not by the lion, indicative of valour, but by an array of dogs, too small for steel, too lithe for avoidance. We were marked, one and all, with their poisonous fangs."

"There was one bite," she put in fiercely, "more virulent than the rest; don't tell me there wasn't, for I shouldn't believe you. Tell me her name."

Again he laughed with increase of bitter irony.

"It's unpronounceable, for she's been a Russian princess these twenty years and more. We



called her Una in those days. She said it built for her the forest of a liberty she'd never known, and doubtless it did, my Vanda, for the hour. Shall I go on? Shall I tell you of that hour? It sticks in my memory like a bone in a man's throat, stopping his enjoyment of his natural food, and not quite big enough to set his poor tormented spirit free from his log of a body. Shall I paint it for you as it looked on that French coast in May?"

"No, no. It wasn't my hour; I've had no hour. Oh, the folly, the waste, of trying to hold a stream of water between one's hands, of treading cautiously lest one should hurt a flower that was never at one's feet; but there, I'll be calm. I know the worst; I think I've always known it. Between us there is still one bond of union—our mercenary advantage; there's that to shelter and protect. Each in our own way we can work for comfort and success. Go and talk to Sibyl; fire her into ambition if you can, and I'll talk to the boy; I'll keep his neck in the collar of our interest.



If I'm a widow, I'll be a merry widow. That's logic, isn't it, after your own heart? So you don't love me; you never did love me, and I'm free to serve the other master only. Straighten my cushions, there's a dear. You look yourself again, only just a bit ashamed of your candor. Lydie's out, the saints be thanked, in the General's motor. They wanted to pack me into the tonneau, and I nearly said 'yes,' but the chauffeur wasn't tempting enough. I'm going to lie here and reconcile my pride to the idea of a stage rival. I shall have to think too of a plan by which to turn the tap of our new friend's genius on to her. At present, you know, I block his view entirely."

"You're sure?" he said thoughtfully, and she lowered her eyelids lest the sudden flash of the eyes beneath should tell too much of the intentions surging into her busy mind.

"You doubt, dear Adrian?"

"Last night he followed her to the balcony. For quite a time——" he stopped, some instinct



warning him of her secret antagonism, but she hastened to allay suspicion.

“You’re quite right. He *has* begun to notice her, though only, I fear, as my daughter. Still, there’s an opening for influence. I’ll talk to him, find out how far his curiosity goes, how far it can be induced to go.”

He lingered for a few minutes, arranging her cushions as desired, talking of trifles; but as he moved away with all too obvious alacrity towards the river bank, she watched him with an expression that, had he turned, must have enlightened him, in disagreeable fashion, as to the value of her boast of equanimity. She seemed the very embodiment of prisoned passion; her face and form were dense with it, and her narrowed eyes gleamed with the ferocity of a trapped wolf, though it was lurid intention rather than despair that dominated her expression.

As she watched the tall, graceful figure saunter away, as she listened to his hail of the girl in the boat, listened to the chiming of the two voices,



and presently to the dip of the oars as the pair made their way down-stream, she was at work tracing her new line of battle, for the little cabin at her gate was in fragments. Her generosity was in like condition, and, divorced thus brutally from one lover of her youth, every faculty in her surged to the standard of the other. She had lost her husband—had, indeed, never possessed him; but her art, though threatened, still remained, and a smile, cruel and baneful, flickered across her face as she thought of her victim given into her desperate hands at the seductive hour of eventide, for she was optimist enough to see in fate the handmaid of the resolute. Adrian could be trusted not to undertake the row up-stream until the sun should be well behind the row of willows lining the river-bank. Lydie could be trusted to allow the moon to participate in her outing, and the boy himself could surely be trusted to shed much, if not all, his suspicion of her in such atmosphere as this. He would be tired, moreover, with his long and solitary tramp;



weary, thirsty, he would drop into the chair Adrian had vacated, would look to her for the filling of his empty cup, and carefully, callously, as Lucretia of Italian fame, she sought and mixed the herbs best calculated to poison and inflame. This was no longer a game with an advantage in tow on which she was about to embark, it was the last throw of the dice, and life—all the life she knew—as yet hung on the hazard of it.



## CHAPTER XIV

### THE BELL ACROSS THE RIVER

AND fate seemed disposed to play into her hands. He came at eventide, his clothes bespattered with mud, his elasticity both of physique and temperament plainly impaired. Tactfully she plied him with tea and light converse. She had discarded her place in the hammock and taken a seat opposite his own. Behind her a silver sickle of a moon showed pale against the dull blue of the heavens. The moist earth exhaled an aromatic odor; there was bird-chatter of a dilatory kind in the bushes that encircled their retreat.

And as she talked in perfect tune with her surroundings she could almost see his favorite tendencies straggling back to their accustomed haunts. Instinctively she guessed the extent, though not the precise nature, of his defection,



and her resolution, like a snake in the thick jungle-grass of her secretive personality, lay watching its prey, biding its time, perfecting the design of its coming assault.

How young he was; how transparent in spite of all his affectations! With what avidity he looked to her for refreshment, for escape from the dark tangle of the thoughts that had pursued him like furies ever since the production of the play. The shadows deepened, and the moon took on a corresponding degree of brilliancy. Hand in hand (like a pair of lovers) his sympathy and her imagination stole out into the fairy night. Slowly, deftly, she selected her gossamer threads; slowly, deftly, she drew him up with them out of that slough of harsh *intro-* and *retro-*spection. Growing ever surer of her own strength, ever more contemptuous of her rival's, she found it possible and highly diverting to introduce the very weaknesses that had undermined his fealty, and to make them pirouette before him, while she explained, with the volubility of a practised show-



man, why and how they contrived to stand clear of censure. She told him of Janus, whose double face sets criticism at defiance; of human frailty, the grub, resolving into the jeweled butterfly, experience. She told of wrecks, of rescue, of broken machinery, and the rapture behind the art of reconstruction; and as her voice began to thrill and throb he ceased to struggle, his features relaxed, his limbs relaxed, his responses softened, till they were no longer walls of greater or less magnitude to be leveled by her eloquent persistence, till his opposition was reduced to nothing sounder than an occasional gibe, which she elected to swallow with an absent air of amiability.

"I pride myself," she told him, "on my tolerance. I think there are but two fatalities in my schedule of existence—*standing still* and *looking back*. So it's no use to try and force regret down my throat; if I swallowed the sensation I couldn't digest it. Listen to that bell beating the passive air, striving to beat us all into one pattern, striving to drive us all in one direction."



“Into a village church,” he murmured, aware that this bell of her illustration was hurrying him yet further into the circle of her influence. “I certainly can’t see you there. In a cathedral? Yes, upon occasion. You’d want your religion highly colored; you’d want incense, and plenty of hothouse flowers.”

“No,” she returned dispassionately. “No, you’re wrong there; you know a great deal of me, but you don’t know all; how should you, when so much is still a mystery to myself? I’m no lover of ceremony, though I know how to employ it. I’m no lover of flowers either; they’re exchanged too carelessly, they fade too quickly; but I love what they stand for—force without gross substance. They express and dissolve and express again. There’s continuity without monotony and without the curse of egoism. Out of the dead comes the living; out of corruption glamor. We trample on them, and, under our feet, disdainful of our feet, they perform the feat of resurrection.”



A white moth fluttered round her head; the leaves of the sycamore began to rustle. Something he thought, with a creep of the flesh, half fearful, half ecstatic, was stirring, trying to find a shape in which to pass the last sentry of his independence. In his veins the blood that had been languid for so many hours was running freely, and, like a boat on the flood, his old craving, never fully analyzed, never fully acknowledged, was moving swiftly towards some desirable and familiar landing-stage. He thought again of Sibyl's creed; he heard it sounded by those bells across the river, and now it was a tale of hurrying and worrying pursuit; it was losing its purity of outline; it was swelling, breaking, spending its significance in idle clamor.

The white moth had vanished, but another shape as white and as ghostly floated towards him; her hand, with its long, tapering fingers, hovered above his own, dallying, it would seem, with the joys of capture, for, when she touched him, he knew that a last frail defense would go



down; the old gods would come into view again bringing their gifts with them. In the darkness he saw light, decoration, the excited and exciting faces of last night's public; he felt on his hot forehead the impress of cool, green leaves—the leaves of the laurel—and smiling, expectant, he leant forward; but, as he moved, he became conscious of interruption; the bell had changed its tune; that delirious pursuit had ceased; a single note of iron, peremptory and strong, emblem of forces disciplined to act in concert and with restraint, gave to his imagination a new impetus; his muscles stiffened; but, quick as he was to recognize and accept this intangible intrusion, she was yet quicker to turn it to account.

“Didn't I tell you, didn't I promise?” she exclaimed in a husky whisper, and her hand flew to her own breast. “We deal with the unwritten laws. That was a voice, Hadden, out of the darkness. Somebody interfered; somebody thinks we're out of the course. We must stop, we must turn; we must try another way. Oh, say you



heard it; say you understood. I've played with the fire so often by myself, but with a friend never."

She had broken the back of his recoil undoubtedly, but a certain degree of stiffness remained in his bearing, and she deemed it advisable to try other tactics. She decided to bewilder him as Puck bewilders the traveler by calling from various points of the compass at once. She fell back upon her cushions with a pettish movement.

"Hush! That's my nightingale; he begins every Sunday evening at this time. I rather think he's a big official of the Underworld. They give him such a hearing. He never gets shouted down either by the Opposition. Listen to such adorable nonsense, nonsense in which, if one only took the trouble, one could find a secret, the secret of the lost color, or the lost word, or the lost spirit of peace," she added, and gave him inadvertently a handle for one at least of his doubts.

"You fidget so," he said irritably; "you dab-



ble in so many impressions that you never get down to the bed-rock of a single one of them."

She made no reply. With her arms behind her head she stared up into the night very much as Sibyl had done, and for the first time he recognized a layer of the ridiculous in his plot with the young girl. This beautiful and absent creature asked neither pity nor championship; her eye was assuredly not on him, but far above his head, and his sense of insufficiency bustled up, like an impotent policeman, to bluster where it was powerless to control.

"You tell and you promise from morning to night, but you never substantiate. You're a museum packed with interesting curios; there's a specimen of everything that flies or swims or crawls, but I begin to doubt if any specimen has life in it. I begin to wonder if there is in you a nerve really susceptible to poignant emotion, or whether every particle is so highly charged that education defeats its own purpose, Vanda, and you represent a dead level."



"A really susceptible nerve," she repeated softly, and brought her eyes down to him. "Shall I tell? Must I tell? I've let such an army of cats out of my bag already for your benefit, and this is such a vulgar, ugly beast, certain to spoil the picture—all the pictures of my childhood, of my early womanhood, that I've painted for you in such bright colors. Have you forgotten them?"

"No. You were a fairy and a devil; you were a battlefield for all the virtues and the vices. Was there actually a quality missing?"

"Yes, the link Adrian and I didn't want you to find. I wanted to be above you and below you; never beside you, never human, circumscribed, domestic. There—it's out. You're thinking of my gibes; but don't you know that we gibe loudest at the foes we fear the most? I chose to tell you half the story of my construction—the impressive half; it's not an uncommon failing with *raconteurs*; but I can't deceive you beyond a certain point. Sooner or later you'd have



forced me to own up. Yes, I'm domestic—listen again. I told you of the fairy and her little silver shoe, but I didn't tell you that she used to rock a cradle with it when nobody was looking, and what's worse, she does it still. Give me a dark room," she went on, the apology in her voice decreasing, "give me an idle hour, and I fly to the indulgence of that ingrained habit as an opium victim to his beloved poison. I strike a match and a tiny kitchen comes into view; I set it to the fagots on the hearth and the smoke begins to curl, the red light plays over the plaster walls, and the cheap prints emerge one by one. You've known them all—there's Red Riding-hood staring out in terror of the wolf, there's a red-coated squire cutting a monster plum-pudding for a row of yellow-haired children, and there's a coronation; it's a low room, and there's a wooden table in the middle; and next I lay my cloth and set the coarse plates and knives, and the hunk of cheese, and the pat of butter, and then I cut thick slices from an imaginary piece of bacon and kneel down



before the glowing fire and toast and dream with one eye on the door and one ear bent to catch the ponderous footfall of the man who never comes. No, he never comes, for I'm just sane enough to stop him in the doorway. And now do you despise? or is the old French adage right, *tout comprendre, my friend, c'est tout pardonner?* ”

Did he understand? Did he pardon? Did this unexpected confession really provide what it purposed to provide—a rallying ground for his declaration of independence? Helplessly he looked into her face, from which the pride had faded; into her strange eyes, wet with tears she was too clever to let fall. Wildly he groped for slipping memories, for the thought of Sibyl, but it refused to take clear shape. She was growing smaller and always smaller, like the figure of the girl we leave behind us when a great liner takes us out to sea, until there was no more of her than the flutter of a handkerchief—no, the flutter rather of those ghostly wings, for the moth was back again. And again the spirit of a dominat-



ing resolution seemed to hunt and to find a human form; again the white hand swayed towards him, and again paralysis settled upon his faculties; the old longing had him in thrall, the longing to play knight-errant, after a fashion of his own, with this woman, maimed and yet winged, this woman whose power and limit hung in so curiously level a balance; and once more, at the psychological moment, intervention came, for the church bell ceased to vibrate, the garden, the river, the fields beyond, lay in a deathly stillness, waiting, so it seemed to his fancy, for some conclusion, some verdict which it lay with him to find, a verdict which she and her audacious nature would be compelled to obey. He found it and stared at it before he gave it utterance, for it was distasteful.

“I don’t love you,” he announced in an unsteady voice, “I don’t love you or approve you; but you’re Scheherazade, teller of a thousand tales, and—and I can’t put you to death till I’ve heard the lot. I don’t say your influence is evil;



I don't know how far it's conscious; I only know that my submission to it is evil, or at least a rotten choice. This isn't a very flattering way of renewing my vows of allegiance, but you've got your remedy, you can always turn me off. You understand, don't you, the nature of the insult I offer? I didn't mean to offer it; it was forced on me by what you called just now a voice out of the darkness—by that unseen somebody with whom you claim to be on terms. He jerked the string again, and suddenly I saw you as the brilliant woman of experience and myself as the usual young idiot in the toils, only with this compensating sop to vanity. I was aware of the toils."

"Let me think," she murmured without a vestige of chagrin, "let me think. You're splendidly candid, and you've told me fairly all you know to tell; but, there's something still behind. I've bits of the wonderful puzzle that you've given me at different times. I've left them about. I must find them and fit them together.



This isn't the first time you've turned on me and treated me to anger and sarcasm. There was the rehearsal—one of the early rehearsals. I called you and you didn't hear; you were looking another way—at a young girl—at my Sibyl. And there was last night. Oh, we'll get it presently, the solution that we want. You were sullen and fearful, you stood in the wings and scowled at me, and now we're coming on to the balcony—to atmosphere that Rodney said it was too late to define. Something happened there, but it wasn't quite the usual something that a man and a maid and a moon might be expected to produce; it wasn't the usual something," she repeated with a suggestive influx of mock anxiety; "it couldn't be, for you're not the usual man, nothing shall induce me to believe you're that." She leaned forward with an effective air of rising terror. "You play with me, but it's because you know me armed. You wouldn't, you couldn't be so cruel as to play with her, with that ignorant, simple child. And yet a suspicion is forming, growing



bigger, closing in on me, Hadden. Hadden, what have you done to her?"

"She's neither ignorant nor simple," he said, watching her and her feigned excitement closely.

"I've done nothing to her; I haven't the power."

"Then what has she done to you?"

"Troubled the water," he answered moodily, "and I begin to think the cruelty was on her side, seeing that I'm an impotent man, unable to take advantage of what she calls the miracle. Yes, she's troubled the water, as you once said I troubled it for you."



## CHAPTER XV

### A PROPHET OF BAAL

FOR some moments retort was out of the question; it was all she could do to conceal from him, under the veil of silence, her consternation. Motionless, almost breathless, she sat awaiting the saving idea that had, as yet, never failed her in the hour of danger. Adrian's defection had bitten deep, deeper than she had quite realized. Anger and determination shielded the wound; but was this last defender of her cause about to tear it open?

The pressman had already turned informer. In a few hours the general public would be making capital out of his revelation. She was indeed the animal in a corner, and desperately she searched her armory for a weapon strong enough to subdue this vacillating mind.



He was looking down, grinding the heel of his boot into the grass. It was evident he meant to leave the attack to her.

“Oh, these castles in the air!” she began at length, more it would seem to herself than to her companion. “Oh, these gorgeous and impossible castles that we erect to the honor and the glory, and, alas, the intoxication of our teens!”

“You’re out of it again, Mrs. Vanda.” His eye, his note, were alike defiant. “She has no use for castles. It’s a temple that she builds, on nothing more or less than an entire abdication of the will, and into this temple she admits a peculiar lover.”

He paused, regarding her with positive malice. She was to understand that his imagination, caught in the meshes of retrogression, had found there a species of confidence. It behoved her to step with almost supernatural caution in this place of prejudice and suspicion.

“Go on, dear Hadden. If I’m out of it, believe me it’s not from stupidity or indifference;



it's the curse of the too close relationship. Go on. I'd like to know that there was some of my poignancy of feeling in her even if it pricks now and then. It has seemed mean, immoral, monstrous, to produce such a smooth and perfect shape and endow it with no passions, as though one retained the kernel of existence and only gave up a part of the shell. She brings a lover to her temple, and she calls him by a peculiar name."

"You've turned my observation about a bit," he said coldly; "but no matter. As for the name, surely you can guess it."

"I'd rather you told me."

"What, not sure of your ground for once? Well, perhaps, it's not surprising; that perplexing Son of a carpenter has a way of putting one's intelligence out of court; but she talks of Jesus Christ in a quite unaffected and singularly effective manner, and—she may be right. At all events she's confidence on her side; she's the belief that He walks in her garden; she's all the spiritual advantages that appertain to such a



miraculous feat. And what have we, I ask you, to set against them?"

"Quicker pulses," she insinuated, "variety of idea." But he laughed disagreeably.

"The pulse of the fever patient, the variety of a music-hall. You can't say we've found consistency, certainly, or even health; we rise and fall without adequate reason; we call down fire from heaven in our moments of exuberance, *but it doesn't come*. Now all this argues a defect in our government. We're not satisfied, and she is. Suppose this belief of hers, which to us appears extraordinary, should be what she imagines it to be—an instrument through which the Ruler of the universe is enabled to come into direct and beneficent contact with human nature; suppose this unassertive girl has discovered the missing key."

"Suppose," she answered sharply, "we turn a little common-sense on to the argument."

"No; I'm inclined to indulge uncommon sense."

She was quick to note the threat in his attitude,



quick to smile and sigh, to fall back into the shelter of her air of abstraction.

“It won’t take us far, but it takes us fast. Yes, we’ll be illusionists. On such a night as this it would be inartistic to be anything else.”

“Then she’s inartistic, for she’ll have nothing to say to illusion.”

“It seems she had a good deal to say to you though.”

He winced under the retort, delivered with impressive placidity, and promptly she followed up her advantage.

“You spoke of cruelty, Hadden, of an impotent man. What did you mean?”

“I spoke too soon, too lightly. After all, that poor old fellow in the Bible had thirty-eight years of disappointment. I’ve not had thirty-eight hours of it yet.”

“She disappointed you? Of what?”

“Let me think.”

“No, that means you’re about to invent, which means again you’ve something to conceal—a



secret—you and Sibyl with a secret! And here's the man and the maid and the moon once more, and once more I—I'm frightened!"

"And what are you frightened of?"

"This talk of passivity; it isn't natural. This tale of a temple; it isn't true. You say she'll have none of illusion, and I begin to fear she's carrying illusion to such a point that I, with all my extravagance of temperament, don't dare to approach. Oh, Hadden, dear, deluded boy, don't you see, don't you understand where the light comes from? Have you never been in love for the first time? No; don't interrupt. I've been through it all, and I know. She isn't my child for nothing, it seems. She loves you. I ought to have guessed before, but I was wrapped up in other visions. You stand to her innocent and quite inexperienced fancy for love incarnate, and you'll have to stand to many another maiden fancy in that form before you've done; and all the figures expressive of love, from the figure of the mild-eyed Christ downwards, are joined to you.



She loves you. And now we're on practical ground again, on more practical ground, my friend, than you and I have ever trod together; for I'm a mother, if a rather eccentric and careless mother, and I can't sit by and see my child hurt. She loves you, and you must come forward with the ring or disappear altogether, and let some one else substantiate for her this dream of a new heaven and a new earth. She loves you, and, Hadden, let me tell you such love is not to be despised, though it swings somewhat foolishly between mysticism and prose."

"I offered no contempt," he put in quickly; and she stopped for a moment, eyeing him warily.

"No, you offered love—love on an impulse, and she doesn't approve of impulses; she wasn't ready for a declaration; she claims the pretty virgin prerogative of saying 'no.' But she'll change the answer right enough, if only you'll give her time; and you *will* give her time, for your own sake as well as hers. I've pleaded this particular cause before, but now I've a double



motive behind my efforts at persuasion. There's mother-love in me—repressed, but not destroyed. I've struggled once to drive you back into the arms of a wife—of any wife. Now it's a particular wife, and such a good and suitable one. You don't know all her virtues, as Lydie and I do. For years she's kept the household wheels running smoothly; and it isn't an easy job with no less than three artists to consider. She's kind and honest, she's capable and unselfish, and I'm not sure that if you probed that 'no' of hers down to its root you wouldn't find it connected with a sense of family duty."

Her acumen certainly went far enough to startle him, and as certainly it exposed a flaw in Sibyl's logic. Again that sense of the ridiculous seized him, weakening yet further his powers of resistance. They had maligned her between them, for was she not tearing with her own hands that bond he had so treacherously attempted to repudiate? Past him she too looked out into the night, claiming a partisan. How was it pos-



sible, he asked himself in ever-swelling bewilderment, to distinguish the true Defender from the false Pretender of the mysterious faith abroad, when each showed so glad and confident a front? With one hand she wrought her cabalistic and enticing signs, while, with the other, she pushed him away, as one pushes a too venturesome child out of a danger zone. And thus, step by step, by means of inimitable patience and finely-colored rhetoric, she turned him back into the half-explored country of her personality.

“One can’t have everything, dear friend, in this world. For me there is no peace. I’m a stormy petrel doomed to beat, for ever and for always, against the wind; she’s the dove crooning its dulcet note from morn till eve. You’ll have hours of recoil from the monotony of it, but you’ll escape the pang that, like a flame, circles my path. There are three depths of existence, as I don’t need to remind you; the fool takes the first, the wise man takes the second, and the genius takes the third. There’s the shallow water, where the



great majority dip and float and achieve nothing; at intervals somebody throws up a cupful of water and creates what we call a fashionable sensation. Then there's the middle course—and it's here I'd have you make your mark. All the conditions are favorable to success; the water is just deep enough to conceal the movements of your limbs, and not deep enough to drown you; it's here that the popular artist has his happy hunting-ground; it's here you make money and friends; it's here the laurel grows; it's here photographers and biographers collect in masses vying with one another for the honor of advertising your prowess. But, move on to the third degree, and pressure begins; one suffers to be beautiful, they say, but one suffers infinitely more to be great; one goes down to the marvelous sea-bottom slowly and cumbrously as a diver, and one goes alone; the gallery stays behind to make its living on the feats of the middle man; we go alone to garner knowledge, and when we find a fragment and bring it up to the surface, there's more mock-



ery than acclamation to be faced. You see, the public appetite for truth has been poisoned; they don't want harsh and often horrid history; they want the fairy tales on which fancy has been long nourished; now and then they gather round to enjoy the excitement of a corpse. Give your life in the cause of speculation, and, should the mode of the moment prove propitious, they'll exalt the discarded shell of you. Oh, it's a profitless and exhausting game, played from the standard of the independent; and so I say for the last time, *go back*; you're not fashioned for martyrdom, its cross and its crown; you're fashioned to play husband and father and favorite of fortune. That bent in you towards realism, towards evolution, was a cruelty if you like. Neither fully possessing genius, nor fully possessed by it, you'll hang half-way between heaven and hell if you don't make an early and a definite choice."

"You forget," he said helplessly, "that we've fought all this out before, and—and it wasn't I who yielded."



"No, I don't forget; the memory of my defeat was too sweet to be forgotten; but for all that it's got to go into the limbo of inconsequent things. You're half-hearted, and so to me and my cause you're useless, worse than useless, you're dangerous; you keep us back like a sick woman or a child; you hamper us with your questions and your doubts and your perpetual glances behind, with your quibbles and your spurts of confidence, and your corresponding drops of depression."

"But—but I'm not sure, Vanda——"

"That's where it is," she broke in hotly, "you're not sure, and one has to be sure, *dead sure*, in my camp. I was sure until you tampered with my imagination, and I mean to be sure again. I've lingered, playing with your possibilities, brooding on what you could have done, or would have done, or half did; but that's all over. Just now you said we call down fire from heaven and it doesn't come; of course it doesn't while you're standing round with your resolution



bobbing up and down like a cork in a pail of water. It comes right enough when I'm alone, when I'm free of you and your skepticism; it's coming now; you've only to look at me, to touch me, to know that I tell the truth. Do you dare to say that there's nothing here to-night under this ghostly tree but two potty little human intelligences discussing the *pros* and *cons* of a modern marriage? I tell you there's fire on my altars, sacred fire, leaping and burning, lit by a human will at unity with itself. I tell you that the missing key is resolution, and that miracle is solely and simply the control of the mind. I tell you that, if I chose, if there wasn't lurking in my veins a grain of the poison that the world calls mother-love, and I feel inclined to call mother-fanaticism, I could bend your wavering will to mine as I could bend a sapling. I should whistle, oh, so softly, and that deeper, truer, bolder self of yours would start and thrill and follow, as the children followed the Pied Piper of Hamelin, far over the hills of common mortal desire. I take



my hand away, but if I brought it back, if I laid it on yours, it would be as though I set a match to a barrel of gunpowder; all the prisoned faculty in you, lying inert, would burst into a blaze, and, joint spirits of fire, we two should rush together through the homestead and the Houses of Parliament, we should burn and destroy, and, from the ashes in our track, would rise, phoenix-like, the embryonic figure of true development, for in you, in me, in every human will that turns a rebel to vulgar law lies hid the germ of omnipotence. Look at me. What am I nourished on? The love of a husband? It didn't take you long to discover that he's a paralytic. The love of a mother and a child? The one keeps her soul in a make-up box, and the other"—her voice faltered effectively—"the other sits in the shelter of my skirts and builds a toy temple with toy blocks. I take my relaxation with them, but my life is drawn from a very different source—my life, that fierce and often frenzied thing that leaps and burns and wars in me, and drives me out from



the garden to the desert, from the desert to the forest, from the forest to the city. Like wind I wander from the unknown to the known and back again; like wind I drop and rise and drop again; now the accomplice of one element, now the slave of another, and now the mistress of a couple, riding them far into the secret haunts of science, but never quite so far as to forget the way back to earth until—until you came and spoke over me the fatal word—my order of full release. Captive yourself to a hereditary instinct, you are allowed to open the door for others, for me. I feel like a great bird, an eagle prisoned so long that it scarce knows how to take advantage of its liberty; it lingers, trying, I fancy, to thank the deliverer before it starts winging a joyous way to the sun. And I mustn't thank you; I mustn't stay beside you. I should infect you with the wonderful knowledge you're not to use yourself, this knowledge of treasure hidden so near to home that nobody has discovered and employed it, this knowledge that allows one to claim, and to claim



legally, the empire, not only of this most circumscribed little world, but of worlds.—Oh my God! what's that?"

*That* was the shrill hoot of a motor-horn, and, with a loud whir the car ran out of the darkness almost on the top of them, to pull up abruptly at the door of the cottage.

"O God!" said Vanda again in a stifled voice, and she half rose in her seat, putting a trembling hand to her heart.

The young man made no comment, and no movement, save for a single glance at the object of interruption, but his face had lost every vestige of its color. She stared over his shoulder with dilating eyes at the group beside the front door; he stared as rigidly at her.

"It's Lydie," she whispered, "and she's dead." The car was full of strange people; they were doctors. Two of them were holding her in the tonneau. "See, they're lifting her out now. In a minute," she added with hysterical vehemence, "they'll call for me, and I daren't go. I know



how she'll look. And it might have been me; it nearly *was* me. They wanted me to go. I almost went. Hadden, Hadden, they're coming to fetch me, and I won't go! You're a man; you must stand between me and that horrible thing—a dead person who didn't want to die, who wasn't fit to die. Oh, will you never go? Why do you sit there staring at me like that?"

A shriek from a white-aproned maid now visible on the steps added confusion to the scene and fuel to Vanda's terror, but he was looking at another point in the situation; he was listening, for the third and last time, to the voice of non-human intervention.

"You prophet of Baal," he said at last with almost brutal emphasis, "where's the fire upon your altars now? Fire! They were twopenny squibs, but they were good enough for me. Yes, I'm going, I and my belated enlightenment. You've been too much for me, but some one—some thing has been a little too much for you."

Conscious now that she was trapped between



two enemies, she looked distractedly from him to the man advancing in their direction.

“I—I’m ill,” she gasped. “You must make allowances. This gentleman will understand. I’m very highly strung. If—if it’s bad news——” she stopped, and the intruder, who was beside them, laid a reassuring hand upon her arm.

“An accident, madam,” he announced. “The old lady has been cut and bruised. But there is no occasion for alarm; we have every hope of pulling her safely through.”



## CHAPTER XVI

### INFLAMMATION

MRS. WINCHESTER, however, was not an easy patient to pull through. Her injuries were not very serious in themselves, but her unbalanced mind promptly set up inflammation. In the first place she refused to be nursed at the cottage, so the doctors, fearful of irritating her into a fever, resigned the point, and, on the third day following the accident, she was conveyed to town in an invalid carriage, escorted by an imposing retinue of attendants. For twenty-four hours it looked as though the move were to prove beneficial. The lady allowed her mind a respite from worry. With her favorite physician established at her bedside, with the familiar scent of her beloved London in her nostrils, with friends ringing the bell at frequent intervals to leave flowers and



kind inquiries, she was disposed to look on the brighter side of the situation; but a couple of sleepless nights washed this tendency out of her, and the sight of the long scar running from forehead to chin down the left side of her face (a sight to which she insisted on being treated) drove her once more into a state of agitation. At the root of it lay a terror of the General's defection. It transpired that the old gentleman was actually in the middle of an observation, which could only be the prelude to proposal, when the accident took place; indeed, according to Lydie's recital, it was to his mental perturbation that they owed it, for, though the cart into which the car had run was on the wrong side of the road, the pace was slow, and a person with his full wits about him could easily enough have escaped collision. The poor soul was eloquent on the subject of this ironic act on the part of fortune. By day and by night she tormented herself, and all within hearing, with the question as to how far the vision of herself in disarray might be calculated to disillusion.



With a persistency that would have been invaluable in cross-examination, she worried out the degree of damage that must have been apparent, deducting so much for the witness's condition at the time. "Was her wig straight when Vanda saw her?" "Was her complexion disturbed?" "Had the doctors been tactful?" To the answers to these sums she proceeded to add such impressions as could be gathered from the frequency of the gentleman's calls, from the tone of his inquiries, from the value of his floral offerings; but as she made up her figures differently every time, it was impossible to establish a satisfactory result, and when, as occasionally happened, a day without a visit intervened, there was uproar in the sick-room, an uproar of which Vanda was the chief victim. The two nurses had early been denounced as heartless machines, while, to every one's astonishment, Sibyl had been forbidden entrance. Innumerable were the motives that Lydie offered in explanation of this edict. "The child was too young to be teased by the sight of



suffering ”; “ she was too new to her stage work to be disturbed by it ”; “ she was too delicate to stand the strain,” etc. The reasons would have passed muster had they emanated from other lips, but from Lydie’s they rang grotesquely, and Vanda cudgeled her brains for the true one—the one her mother saw fit to suppress. More than once she came upon the track of it, but always with the same result; her courage to pursue would flag, turn tail, drive her back into the land of make-believe, where alone she could find pasturage to her liking.

There was little enough of it going in these days, for it was on her that the invalid elected to lean, and no allowance was made for the tax upon *her* time and vitality; she was compelled to come straight from her hasty supper to a three-hour watch, for the hours preceding the dawn were the most terrible of the twenty-four, and Lydie insisted on a sympathetic companion to share the horror of them. It was hard work to keep sleep at bay, but it was yet harder work to face that



perpetual demand for reassurance; nor was reassurance all that the patient exacted. There was an old wound that she seemed positively to delight in touching, in tearing, a wound of which, in some secret fashion, she must have long been cognizant, for now, with an unmistakable air of malignity, she essayed to harp upon the bond between herself and her daughter; by the hour together she would prattle of their common views and aims, of mental and physical resemblance. Ruthlessly she would remove, brick by brick, the wall that is set up round each human personality until the scared and wretched listener would actually feel, in every sensitive fiber of her being, the intrusion of this detestable relationship, until it seemed to her that the trespass was accomplished and their two natures ran, a fierce and dirty river, towards the sea of utter annihilation. Lydie told, it is true, of depths to which Vanda had as yet not fallen; in her delirium she let drop the tale of incidents and adventures blacker than any in the memory of her companion, but the difference,



as the younger was quick to recognize, lay only in degree of opportunity. Look where she would it was to find on every face, animate or inanimate, the hideous reflection of herself. With futile misery she thought of the night of the accident, of her self-betrayal, forced from her by circumstances that, do what she would, she was unable to disconnect from a superhuman agency. Her victim had been under protection, though she still refused to christen his protector, and between them this black memory of interference lay like an impenetrable cloud. They seldom spoke, though from the wings he watched her nightly, watched with a sneer she felt rather than saw her finished and almost flawless portrayal of the rôle that had once meant so much to both. Dark indeed were the thoughts she brought to the sick-chamber, and one darker than all the rest gradually forced its way to the front. Against her will, against all that was left of gentle and of generous feeling, there crept into her distorted mind the thought of release; and release was a figure in a



black mask. Night after night as she sat beside the tossing patient she found her riotous imagination binding the scarred face in another sort of bandage, folding the restless hands one upon the other, letting down into the dank earth a phantom coffin in which a very real cause of distress lay safely confined; and, as though an instinct warned the other of treachery, her antagonism grew, her *you and I* became a lash falling with pitiless regularity on a raw back, until Vanda, coming in one night weary and fearful from the theater, found herself in the midst of the inevitable crisis. Story, very white about the gills, very shaky about the legs, took upon himself the part of spokesman. Mrs. Winchester, so it appeared, was "going on something awful," she had driven every one from her room; the nurse in attendance had, in fact, been driven with contumely and without luggage from the house; the other was asleep, or there was little doubt she would have shared a similar fate; every one hardy enough to put a nose into the room had had it bitten off. The origin of the dis-



turbance took some ferreting out; but eventually, with the help of various witnesses, it was explained. Maude, pinker even than ordinary with fright and confusion, admitted that, on the invitation of the nurse, she had visited the sick-room, and, deceived by the patient's pretense of sleep, had whispered an incautious question or two, and received an equally incautious answer. The talk was ominous; and suddenly Mrs. Winchester had opened her eyes and routed them. Caught in the wheel of morbid interest and importance, the girl would have continued, but her mistress signed to her to stop. Listlessly she looked round the circle, her eye lingering an instant on that of Sibyl.

“ Might I go, mother? I'm used to her.” But Vanda shook her head.

“ She won't hear of it, my dear. The mention of your name is like a red rag to a bull. Ring up Dr. Matty for me; he ought to be here. Had nobody the sense to send for him? ”

“ The doctor was hout, ma'am,” Story ex-



plained with an air of injured dignity. "I rang up myself, and the man promised to give the message when the doctor come in. There was no more to be done as I could see, ma'am, though maybe I'm wrong, being but a servant and a pushon of limited hintelligence."

"I'm blaming nobody, my good man," she returned, not over graciously. "Clear this room for me. Sibyl, wait up till your father arrives and get him to join me upstairs; meantime I'll do what I can with her."

Wearily she passed out and up the staircase, moving ever more slowly as she neared her hated destination. Already through the open door there came to her ear the sound of a raving voice, and as she crossed the threshold it was to be met with a regular fusillade of invective.

"So you've come at last, have you? A pretty thing if I was to die while you were reveling in your heroics before the public. I'm done for, and you knew it all along—everybody knew it except me, the one person concerned. I'm dying,



and there isn't even a doctor to smooth the end for me. Matty's like the rest of you, turns up as regular as the milk to feel my pulse at five shillings a beat, but takes care to keep clear when there's anything to do. What do you stand staring there for as if I was a side-show? What are you going to do now you have put in an appearance? What have you got to say? You've always found a reason for everything; find a reason for my being tormented like this."

"You're dreaming, Lydie. Let me smooth the clothes; let me read to you. There's no need for all this excitement; only be calm. You're no more likely to die than I am if you won't work yourself up into a fever." But Mrs. Winchester's fears were not to be allayed so easily.

"Oh, that's your opinion, is it?" she snorted. "Unfortunately for me I know only too well the source from which you get all your blessed ideas. It's inconvenient, it's inartistic, to talk of real trouble, of real pain, of real danger. You want



me to hold my tongue; you'd ask me to let myself be snuffed out without a nasty fuss; you don't like a fuss unless you make it yourself. And where's that lay-figure of a husband of yours, I'd like to know? There's no love lost between us; but, if it's only for the sake of common decency, he might show up."

"He will, dear, directly; I heard a hansom just now. I told Sibyl to send him. He'll be here in a minute or two when he's had something to eat."

"Something to eat!" raged the old woman. "Trust him not to risk a mental upset till he's outside a comfortable meal." But for once Adrian disappointed her cynical forecast.

"Lydie, you old fool!" he said, stepping soft-footed to the side of the bed, "don't waste your powder and shot on me; put it all into the task of getting well. You've got the pluck of ten if only you'd use it."

"Butter!" she retorted, but with a slight diminution of ferocity. His handsome, smiling



face touched some reassuring chord, and there was appeal behind the gleaming eye.

“Butter! I’ve lived on it, and I suppose you think I ought to die on it.” Then, at the thought of death, her passion rose again; she glared from one to the other, sitting upright, a skinny arm extended in menace.

“But you won’t get me off so easy, let me tell you. I know the game now, and a nice, pleasant game it is for everybody but me. When Matty comes he’ll prescribe a sleeping draught, and you’ll coax and threaten and talk what you’ll call common-sense to make me swallow it; but I’m going to fight, so now you know. I’m not going to consider all your beastly feelings. You’ve never considered mine. I’ve been tricked and lied to, and told I’m better, and all the time I hadn’t a dog’s chance, and you knew it. The idea was to ship me off without a row. But I’ve outwitted you, or rather those two gossips have. You don’t catch me playing the meek, old grandmother going out in order of precedence with a ‘God



bless you, my children!’ Oh, you humbugs, you frauds, you murderers!” she added with ferocity, stimulated, it would seem, by the man’s regard of her, “you’d stand there and watch me give up the ghost as calmly as if I was one of your stage performers. Oh, I can see you in your black coat playing the crocodile at my funeral, smacking your lips over the sherry, directing the operations, playing the leading gentleman to the delight and the edification of every one present; but I’m not going to fit into your picture. Do you hear? I’m not going to die easy to please you or her either.”

“Why die at all?” he asked, with a touch of raillery, and again her fury yielded a little way.

“Heaven knows I don’t want to,” she wailed pitifully.

“And I bet you twenty pounds to one you cheat the undertaker. I bet you you’re back in your old part this day month in spite”—he added with subtle inflection—“of what the Bayley woman says.”



"And what does the Bayley woman say?"

"Says you haven't the spirit to get over a shock like this at your time of life."

"My time of life!" she shrieked. "Why, I'm five years her junior."

"Of course you are; that's where the joke comes in; that's where I'd have *you* come in. Think of her face, Lydie, when you show up as sound as a bell and turn her out of a temporary possession of your part. She's making a devil of a mess of it, I may tell you."

Finding her inclined to consider these soothing notions, he embarked good-humoredly on a quite fictitious history of the degeneration of the play since the accident, and presently he had the gratification of seeing her fall back upon her pillows, of hearing her laugh with some vestige of returning gaiety. Her violence of mood simmered down, and there went with it much of her strength. She looked very frail and spent; and again there stirred in the daughter's heart that cruel and horrid thought, now so painfully



familiar, a thought to which the doctor, coming in an hour or so later, gave an unconscious encouragement. He sat for a considerable time with the limp wrist between his fingers; he spoke equably and reassuringly to his patient; but Vanda heard under each suave utterance a repetition of the fancy leaping so wildly in her breast. Mrs. Winchester took her draught with unexpected meekness, she even took a little playful reproach for her treatment of the nurse, though she refused to allow the remaining one to be summoned. Perhaps it was Dr. Matty's quiet acceptance of this ultimatum that emphasized for Vanda the true position of affairs. In obedience to a gesture, she followed him from the room to another on the ground-floor, where she stood with lowered eyelids listening to those ambiguous phrases that have conveyed despair inexpressible to many a warm heart. She was glad to think that science has its limits, that her companion could see in her no more than a woman trained to control emotion, glad to think that the inmost depths of in-



dividuality may be preserved from analysis and the pillory of public condemnation. He gave her sympathy, directions, and something as near a promise of that gruesome order of release she hankered for as his profession allowed. Slowly she returned to her post, signing to her all-too-ready husband to leave the room.

The night was close, in spite of a half-opened window; there was no sound but the tick of the clock and the soft breathing of that still form upon the bed; while, to the silent watcher, it seemed as though this last declaration of vitality was sounded in fainter and ever fainter notes, as though presently it must decrease to nothingness, must pass, must cease to press upon her own germ of being. But, with the coming of the dawn, the old woman began to fidget, to mutter, to break out once more into lurid recital, half historical and half fictional, and wholly sordid. And Vanda watched the long procession pass in helpless protest, recognizing now a human shape, now a monster of the diseased imagination, alike dis-



torted by contact with the mind that gave them representation. "Farrer!" the dreamer called out more than once, and on each occasion Vanda saw a youth emerge from out of the shadows of the room; his face was beautiful but ghastly pale, and a real line ran from ear to ear across the region of the throat; and always in his floating track there followed the semblance of a woman, a girlish thing hidden in falling hair, a very Marguerite, fashioned to embosom wrong, her only movement a wringing of the hands. Time and again they floated past, and always they seemed to stare with their desperate and reproachful eyes, past and through the author of their troubled story, at herself—herself, innocent of all save a careless knowledge of it. And it was the same with all, with this whole army of ghosts; they were the ghosts of wrongs committed by another; but the *alibi* she strove to prove was beaten down, ruled out of court; round her circled, in obedience to that dread voice, the legions of forces she had tried to use for illegal purposes.



Friendship, passion, art, genius and interest had control; they combined, they split and they rejoined, exchanging shapes with bewildering and demoralizing adaptability until the spectacle of their frenzied powers saw fit to culminate in a single picture, aggressively clear, the picture of a cart in which they two, mother and child, stared each into the wild face of the other to escape the yet wilder faces of their judges and executioners; for it was to the guillotine that they traveled; it was to mutual death and mutual disgrace they were being hurried. In a moment, in another moment, the horror so long evaded, so long defied, would be upon them, the knife would fall. But with a scream Vanda sprang to her feet.

“Be still!” she exclaimed, and spread imperious arms above the bed. “Be still, and we’ll find rescue even now.”

Startled by the noise, Lydie’s mind came laboriously back from its journey across the boundary of reason.



"Is it you?" she said quaveringly. "Is it only you? And what do you want?"

"Peace; a little spell of peace."

"You won't find it here, my girl. I've been all ways to look; I've been all ways," she added in rising excitement; "and there's nothing here but pain and cruelty. All the gates are shut. Where am I to go to? I must go somewhere. What's to happen, Vanda, what's to happen now?"

"I don't know. Let me fetch somebody—the nurse; she's in the next room."

"What are you frightened of?" the sick woman inquired harshly. "You're in no danger."

"I thought I was; I thought that we were bound together; that we were going together to an awful death—you and I, you and I."

"Death!" the other whispered, and sat upright clutching at her daughter's arm. "Is it death then after all? You said it wasn't; he said it wasn't. You promised I should go back to the life I know—to the theater."



“Yes, yes,” Vanda answered soothingly, controlling her own terror by a supreme effort of will. “Lie down and go to sleep.” But Lydie laughed, a weird and bitter laugh, pressing her claw-like fingers more firmly into the beautiful arm supporting her. “I’ll sleep when I know the truth, and not before. Tell me the truth. What did that sleek beast of a doctor say to you? The truth—the truth!”

“But—but I’ve told you, dearest. You’re better. You’ll be all right soon if only—if only you wouldn’t work yourself up into these wild moods. Won’t you believe me?”

“Why should I believe you?”

“I’m your own child, Lydie. Why should I deceive and lie to you?”

“My own child—yes. Perhaps I can’t quite hear a child of mine telling the truth; perhaps I know deep down in my evil old mind that I couldn’t create a child to speak the truth. But *you* did,” she cried on a sudden impulse of memory, “and I want her. Do you hear? I want



her at once beside me; I want her on the edge of the bed; I want to see her smile; I want to see her fold her hands in her lap. We never fold ours; they're always twitching, twitching, twitching."

"Sibyl? You want Sibyl? But you said——"

"Good God! child, what's it signify what I said? I say now that I want her. I've looked into all the other faces, and they're hard and mean. There's only Sibyl left. Fetch her. Don't stand there like a graven image; fetch her, and be sharp or it will be too late!"



## CHAPTER XVII

### THE WRITING ON THE WALL

“So far, good,” she said some minutes later.  
“But is it safe to ask questions?”

She was back among her pillows looking out of them with fever-inflamed eyes at the girl seated, as she had desired, upon the edge of her bed.

Sibyl blinked a little under the light of the candle she had brought and set upon the table among the lotions and the medicine bottles. Over her white dressing-gown her hair was scattered loosely, lending to her aspect an added air of youth and innocence.

“There’s the smile,” said her grandmother, peering nervously at her, “and there are the still hands. She’s not afraid. But then Adrian wasn’t afraid either; and she’s his child. Suppose—suppose it’s only callousness. We’re in-



fect stock. And now she's come, and I don't dare to put the question. Vanda, Vanda, take her away again, keep her away; keep the truth away. It's death, and I'm not fit to die."

The candle guttered, and the girl leaned forward to snuff it. The calm gesture served to quiet the patient.

"No, don't go, Sibyl; stay where you are. But you mustn't speak unless I ask you to. I can breathe better now. You brought something into the room with you though. I'm not sure what it is, or whether I can bear it. I've tried to keep you out, Sibyl, but I couldn't. You know something I've refused to know—the story of—of——"

"The story of life," said Sibyl with reassuring simplicity.

"I thought it was the story of death, but it isn't; you swear to me it isn't." The old woman was up again on her lean elbow, her wizened face alight.

"Life, Sibyl; and you're sure?"



“Quite, quite sure.”

Mrs. Winchester fell back again, sobbing hysterically; then, ceasing as suddenly as she had begun, she turned upon her daughter.

“Do you hear?” she screamed, with devilish satisfaction, “do you hear that? Put that in your pipe and smoke it. You’ve not done with me yet,” then, her note softening, she turned to the young girl and looked into the grave, pitiful eyes with some degree of apology. “You don’t know their games, my dear; you don’t know what they’re up to, what they’re waiting for and praying for; you don’t know,” she went on deliriously, “what she keeps in that black heart of hers. But I’ll tell you; lean closer and I’ll tell you. It’s murder; it’s the murder of her own mother—she and he together—the one as bad and as merciless as the other. He looks at her, and she at him, and both of them at me; and it’s a conspiracy of silence. But I’ve found it out. *I* know and *she* knows; and *she* knows *I* know; and she’s afraid to look me in the face. She’s waiting, Sibyl, for



the moment when I get tired of resistance; for the moment when I lie still; and then—and then they'll close in and seize me, and bind me tight in a winding-sheet, and nail me fast in a coffin, and carry me out feet-foremost. They'll talk of a happy release; and they'll rig up a fine funeral; and there'll be the company in mourning and half-mourning, with the Bayley woman not knowing how to keep the grin off her face till the earth's over me; and there'll be Lady Alice quoting poetry: 'To live in hearts we leave behind, is not to die.' Ugh! I can hear her. And with luck Adrian will book the Duchess, if she hasn't a race meeting on; and he'll support her to the grave-side; and she'll talk of her own 'dear departed,' whose life with her was a hell. I can see 'em all, that crew of humbugs, with Vanda in the middle trying to use her lace handkerchief without spoiling her make-up. I can see it all—all the mock misery, and my real misery; shut up in that awful box; carried out and never carried back again."



Sobbing once more she buried her face in the pillows, and Vanda, who had stood as though paralyzed during this tirade, moved hurriedly towards the door.

“I’m going, Sibyl, I’m going to my own room. I can’t stand any more of it. I’ve had weeks you know, and there’s a limit. I can do nothing. She’s taken this unaccountable suspicion of me into her mind, and I’m best out of the way. Try and soothe her; try and get her to sleep, and call the nurse if she’s too much for you.”

“Gone, has she?” said Lydie, turning her distorted face upwards. “Bolted? Well, I’m glad of it. I hate her! Oh, my God, how I hate her, with her slithering body and her slithering, sliding mind! How I hate her, and her stock of evil wisdom!”

“Hush! dear. There isn’t any evil wisdom, as there isn’t any death. Listen. You *shall* be carried back. I can carry you back myself—not into this room, which smells of sickness, but right back into the past, when you were a girl like me.”



“I was never a girl, never a girl like you; I was a genius,” the poor thing answered with a pathetic mixture of pride and despair. “I was a genius and a beauty and a chip of the old block; and I hadn’t a chance. The blood was too strong, the blood of those who went before. There was Nelly the comedienne; she painted the town a fine scarlet in her day, I can tell you; and there was Nancy the tragedienne, and Pepita the dancer; and they were public favorites, the lot of them, and King’s favorites; and they didn’t want to be turned out of the flesh; and they’re in me, wrangling and whispering, urging me to all sorts of excess. Oh, the crimes and the follies they’ve prodded me to. I’ve been back to-night over the old ground, and—and it’s red with blood. I didn’t mean to kill—I didn’t want to kill; but they got in the way—they got in the way. Sometimes, child, it was no more than a laugh that I produced, but they went mad under it, and they turned on one another, and there was death and pain and wrong behind me wherever I went.”



"You mustn't look behind. You've paid for the past over and over again in miserable thoughts and fears. It's gone, and you must look ahead. Look at me. See how calm I am; and yet I love you; I belong to you. If you were in danger I should be in danger too."

There was a thirsty look in Lydie's eyes.

"Go on," she murmured, "it isn't enough; it's the cup, but I want water in it. You've got to prove a bond, not just to prattle of it as we do in our theater. Prove it; cross the gulf; come near enough for me to know you're not an angel on a Christmas card."

Eagerly the young girl bent towards her companion, and, enthralled by their own intensity, both failed to note a movement in the doorway. Like a ghost unable to keep away from the scene of some past tragedy, Vanda was back again, watching, waiting, for she knew not what of succor from the demon in her own breast. Impossible she found to sit alone, with the faint promise of miracle at work here. All her latent curiosity



concerning the secret consequence of Sibyl surged up and drove her back to the one spot from which explanation might emanate. What if the quiet vaunt were to be justified in her absence? What if the spirit of power were beneficent, and she, shut away in the prison of her own cowardice, should miss the word of rescue? She dared not keep away, she dared not face again the lash of that virulent tongue, and, choosing the middle course, she dropped furtively into the seat behind the screen.

“I love you!” said the clear, sure voice, “and love is the bridge.”

“Love, love, love!” wailed the weak one with impatience. “It’s a bridge I’ve turned to queer purposes. You’d never even understand them. It’s no use, no use. You’re a throw-back to that monkish ancestor of ours of whom we’ve made game so often. Yes, there *was* such a person; and I began to think there *is* such a person—that such persons don’t die like the rest of us. There’s a portrait of him in the box-room with his face



to the wall, but his eyes go through me with the look in yours. He went the whole hog, you know. Left his wife and his children, and took to peas in his shoes, and a hair shirt—to the whole ridiculous pageant of martyrdom, with a bonfire to top up with. And he spoke of love—he'd a kind of right to speak of it. But you don't know the meaning of the term; you're talking out of a nunnery; you've never felt the throb of human longing, the insatiable hunger of human desire; you've never had a lover at your ear, much less a dozen, each with his own haunting tale of bliss. I like to look at you; you're restful and cool and kind; but there's no bridge, only the pretty talk of one." A brief silence supervened; then the girl-note, infected now by a curious suggestion of diffidence, the diffidence of one who exposes a delicate nerve in her constitution.

"If I told you, if I confessed, Lydie, that love is more to me than a beautiful and inspiring name, if I told you that the lover came, and that I wanted to listen to the story with every fiber in



my being—if I told you this, would it make a difference? Could I come nearer?”

“A lover!” ejaculated her listener in utter surprise. “A lover, Sibyl—already? And why hasn’t somebody told me? I’m sure there’s been little enough to amuse me of late. A lover! And what’s he been saying to you? But, no, they always say much the same thing. I’d rather hear what you said to him.”

“I said ‘no,’ Lydie.”

The answer was scarcely audible, and Vanda, craning her neck in the direction of the bed, caught it with difficulty.

“What, wasn’t he rich enough or handsome enough?” jeered the old worldling, striving to smother what in her inmost heart she recognized as a sense of disappointment if not dismay.

“He was so rich, so handsome, that I was tempted. He showed me all the kingdoms of the earth, and they were beautiful.”

“A German princeling—that’s the nearest we ever get to a kingdom—who’s been round lately?



And why's it all been kept so dark and what in the name of all that's ridiculous did you say 'no' for?"

"I had to."

"Rubbish. Some one's been talking nonsense to you about morganatic marriages. My good child, I've had a lot of experience, and there's more security, not to mention fun, in such an arrangement than in anything our rotten marriage law allows. But what did his Serene Highness say to your far more serene obstinacy?"

"He isn't a Highness; he's quite an ordinary young man, and he lives in quite a poor way. But he was a prince to me, because I love him; and it was a kingdom that he offered, because there were children in it. Lydie, the thought of those children made it difficult to say 'no.' I'm always looking back at them; I'm always aching for them; I'm always thinking of their tiny souls growing up around me, first, into a family and then into a race, and on again into a universe, and in each heart the secret that is mine; and for



a minute I was torn; I thought of saying 'yes,' and letting the great good come out of the little evil."

"Evil? Where's the evil in taking the man you want, especially if he wants you? Who was to stop your saying, 'yes,' if common-sense didn't warn you against garrets?"

"Something so small that, at first, I thought I might pretend not to see it; only the knowledge that, if I took him, somebody else would be unhappy."

"Oh, another woman? That's comprehensible enough—inevitable, indeed, seeing that we're always three to one where matrimony is concerned. And would this other woman found your universe better than you could?"

"No; that's why the choice was hard. She doesn't believe in that universe—not yet; but she believes in one of its bulwarks; she believes that the young are kind, that they don't want to push her out. If I'd taken him she would have been left to utter darkness, for she loves not him



(he's a boy to her) but his generous defense of her."

"I see. And where does the story end?" questioned Lydie fretfully.

"I don't know, I won't ask; but it ends in the most beautiful way, like every other story of life, so long as we don't interfere."

"As you'd have me end in fact—a saint in a white night-gown. But it's no good; you've given me a bit of distraction, but that's all you've done with your ingenious confession. Do you suppose I loved in your way? I can't endure children to begin with, and I couldn't endure you till you began to make yourself indispensable. I know nothing of sacrifice, and don't want to. Of course, this is a most desirable atmosphere to introduce into a sick-room, but it doesn't get beyond the footlights, it doesn't penetrate into me; I'm too choked up with other ideas, with gruesome memories and vile habits. When I drove those fools helter-skelter out of my room the devil came prancing in, and I was in hell. There



wasn't an inch of solid ground to stand on; it crumbled under my feet. You can't sell your soul and snatch it back again at the last minute. 'God's' a high-sounding name, and I know lots of people like it as a drug, when nothing else will serve their turn. I'm honest at all events; I've spent the blood-money, and it's only fair I should go and hang myself."

"Then you believe in justice."

"Well, to that extent; though, as you see, I don't take kindly to my dose of it. I'm not a fool, though I often wish I were. I think I'm a Swedenborgian at bottom. I'm convinced it's our normal tendency that gets its way in the end, and my normal tendency is to go down. I seemed to be falling through space, feet upwards, into decay and fire, into the jaws of the furies, and I knew their faces; my scars were on them. I yelled to every quarter of the globe and only the echo of the shriek came back to me. This room," she turned a ghastly face from side to side of it, "is swarming now with the spirits of those I've



trampled on and traded on, it's black with them, it's shrill with their calls for vengeance." But Sibyl laughed, and the sound was startling; it was like the cracking of ice upon a river-bed—a rhythmic sound, sweet with the promise of rescue and the return of spring.

"There's no room for them, Lydie. There are too many of my friends here, and mine," she added confidently, "are the stronger. Mine have been through the fire and the water. There's Daniel, who saw the image of God in the eye of the lion; and there's the little maid who guided Naaman, the captain of the host of the king of Syria, to the river of healing; and there's Peter the Rock, and John the Beloved, and the daughter of Jairus, who heard the voice of Jesus and rose from the sleep that we call death; and there are all the thousands who found the secret of immortality and kept it, and were burned with it, and stoned with it, and crucified with it, and took it back with them into the heart of life; and wherever I go they go with me, and when I call



in the hour of temptation they flock to me and circle me, and no one, not even the lover I told you of, can fight a way through. You think of the earth opening and swallowing you up. I think of the heavens opening and of the white dove coming down. You think of the darkness, and I think of the day breaking and the shadows fleeing away, of the light coming, as it's coming now through these curtains. See, I pull them aside and you can feel for yourself that it's all true, this wonderful story of life and love; it's coming back to you like a new stock of breath into a tired body."

She had left her seat, and she stood full in the stream of sunlight, her mild and radiant face towards the bed.

"It's delusion," quavered the sick woman, "but, oh, it's very sweet. I'd like to believe in it, only I can't," she added, with a last, desperate spurt of opposition. "You're a girl of nineteen, and at nineteen one can believe in anything, even in sacrifice, so long as it's highly colored. One



isn't afraid of risks at nineteen; one isn't afraid of the back of a lover, it's so certain he'll turn again, or somebody will replace him. No, it's no good, the spell won't work. Think of my getting well and you'll see it for yourself. I've nowhere to go to, save back to the theater, and what do you suppose would happen to your influence there? No, it's just a drug, a nice, soothing drug, lulling me through the gate of death. I'm done for. I wasn't going to own it to *her*, but I'll own it to you. I'm done for, and my one comfort is, *she's* done for too, though she'll hold on maybe for another twenty years."

"Hush! dear. Nobody is ever done for; there's always a way back, only we can't see it. There's a way back for her, and for you too. There's an answer to this riddle of despair, though I'm not wise enough to find it; there's an answer, and it will come. I think it's coming now—in writing—in sunlight on the wall." But the old woman shrieked and raised imploring arms as though to ward off the approach of an enemy.



“ I won’t have it. Do you hear? I won’t have it. I know the sort of answer you’d produce—a convent. You’d take me in and bury me alive; you’d feed me on bread and water, and the husks of penitence; but I’ll have none of it. I’ll die sooner. I’d rather go into the earth in a coffin than into salvation by that beastly back-door.”

“ It isn’t a convent,” said the girl, in the absent fashion of one who follows a fine trail of intuition. “ The answer’s kind and warm. God knows how much you can bear, how much you’ve borne already; and it’s very near; in a minute, in another minute, I shall be able to read it. I *have* read it,” she added with growing intensity, “ only a little while ago, in a book, downstairs, while I was waiting to hear the doctor come. It was written by a poet, but he was a Christian first, for this is what he said—every line is coming back :

When the pulse of hope falters,  
When the fire flickers low  
On your faith’s crumbling altars,  
And the faithless gods go;



When the fond hope ye cherished  
 Cometh, kissing to betray,  
 When the last star hath perished,  
 'Love will find out the way.'  
 When the last dream bereaveth you  
 And the heart turns to stone,  
 When the last comrade leaveth you  
 In the desert alone;  
 With the whole world before you,  
 Clad in battle array,  
 And the starless night o'er you,  
 'Love will find out the way.'

Lydie, there's love here, throbbing in this room, not only my great love for you, but the great spring from which it is fed. You're not going back to the theater; you couldn't go back to that place of mist and shadow, that place of false reflection. Some day, some day very soon, the theater will be given up to us, and we shall paint the truth there; we're growing tired of pretense. Some day the false gods will be turned out and the true God will come in, and He will manifest; He will speak as He's speaking now, for the answer is here, and I can read it on the wall there, in letters formed by the sunlight and the shadow,



and again upon your face. It's changing, Lydie; it's growing gentle and so beautiful. Your eyes are shining like the eyes of a child; you're not afraid any more, for it's life that's coming in with this fresh morning air; it's the breath of a living God pouring into your veins; it's life, the life you tried to throw away and couldn't, the life that can't and won't be lost."

"Life!" echoed the other in a bewildered voice, "life! And it's kind after all. The pressure's going, Sibyl, and the fear's going, and the anger's gone, and I don't hate any more. I want her. I want to tell her that it isn't true; that there's no cart, and no guillotine, and no cruel faces lining the way to death. Fetch her—quick. I want to tell her." But the voice broke, the figure, upright now in the bed, swayed suddenly, and the girl ran forward to catch it in her arms.

"There's no need to tell—she knows—we all know, Lydie, in the end." And then the voice stopped, for the traveler had gone, and the eyes,



turned up a moment ago in ecstasy of gratitude, were but the windows of an empty house.

Tenderly Sibyl laid her burden down, folding the thin hands together, closing the eyelids, disposing the wasted body with dignity. Time—a long time—seemed to pass; the wind grew mildly boisterous and the sun bolder; the curious hieroglyphics on the wall became yet clearer—letters of fire and force, they stamped the atmosphere with vitality that, shifting like the pictures in a kaleidoscope, kept the mind ever on the chase.

Vanda, peeping furtively out from her hiding-place behind the screen, grew gradually indifferent to detection. Fascinated, she inhaled the influence of the still chamber, yielding, one by one, such of her temperamental prejudices as the torment of the last weeks had spared. Slowly she crept into the heart of this strange country of long distrust, fingering and testing and staring, smiling and sighing, while into her bearing there came, as there had come into that of the dying woman, an air of puzzled rapture.



From that figure kneeling beside the bed power seemed to emanate. Through this frail instrument the music of immortality began to sound, to swell, to transform and to create, until, to the now fully captive imagination of the watcher by the door, the haunting and elusive age of miracle had indeed been restored; the faith of this neglected and suspected child, the force of silent prayer, to which her being lent itself so unreservedly, so gladly, so fearlessly, had touched at last, as with a wand, the common things of earth and made them holy. Literally and truly the angel came down, and the room was a room no longer, but a city, spreading till it lay four-square, a new Jerusalem, the city of a mind rebuilt, restored, the city of Vanda's own subtle mind, in which great crimes had been enacted and great opportunities abused. But, at the thought of opportunity a point of light, bright as a star in a vague sky, caught and held her attention. One stolen thing she could yet replace, one wrong she could yet right; and who could tell, in such atmosphere of



glorious unreality, what might not evolve from this first eager sacrifice of self?

Cautiously she moved her stiff limbs, cautiously she gained the door, the passage, the seclusion of her own chamber; and here, as in the one she had fled, the influence stirred, the light shone.

“The children,” she whispered, and dropped to her knees beside the empty bed, “the children, her children and his and *mine* by virtue of this marvelous new code of relationship; the children growing up about us into a family, into a race, into a universe; the children given into our hands”—she raised her own with dramatic exultation—“and our hands clean; the theater given into our hands, and our hands supple and strong; the theater a place of true reflection. Yes, it was that she promised; it was—it is to be a temple swept clear of the money-changers, and I a priestess of the temple. Oh, Unknown God, to Whom, in the fastnesses of my nature, I must once have raised an altar, in pity of these many scars, forgive, restore and re-inspire till, from the wreck of my



presumptuous will, there shall at length evolve that gallant ship that man, with youth and intellect and generosity upon his side, was yet powerless to produce." Born an artist, educated an artist, she would remain an artist to the end; but, behind her florid diction, behind her rather pompous delivery, there now lay the saving grave of sincerity; and, as her artificial self yielded to this last and most compelling intruder, there passed through her all too susceptible body a shiver, a veritable serpent passage of profound and awful enlightenment.

" ' Eyes and I saw not, ears and I would not hear, ' " she stammered, and for once the glib tongue faltered; from the lines of face and form the consequence dissolved; wide-eyed she stared towards the window and the light, while, on the breath between her fluttering lips the spirit of her long distrust passed freely in and out, weaving into the warp and woof of this peculiar temper the fine but indestructible thread of religious conviction.



“No need to tell,” she broke out again in halting fashion; “we all know in the end, we all knew in the beginning; and it’s just a question of the length of the tether. We come out of IT; we go back into IT; the great shapeless IT of abstract monarchy; innumerable names, innumerable aspects, and, behind each and all, the mystical outline of the Trinity; behind each and all the God of fire and earthquake, the gentle Son of the carpenter, the tender, silver body of the dove; complexity and simplicity, glory and the daily round, and the answer to the puzzle inscribed on the white tablet of a child’s unquestioning faith. Oh, Sibyl, Sibyl, physical record of my extravagance and folly, you make your point, you justify for me, at least, the theory of existence, and the story ends just as you promised that it should. Hope for me and a prince for you and a soul-garden for the lot of us. But the world”—her smile lost something of its new-made mother-look—“the world will say, ‘A marriage has been arranged between Hadden, only son of a potentate of May-



fair, and Sibyl, only daughter of an adventurer of Bohemia'; the world will say, 'Well done, Bohemia! No doubt as to who arranged it'; and Renshaw, senior, will say, 'Oh, be hanged!' and his lady will say, 'Oh, dear!' and none of them will say or know that it was a marriage made in heaven."























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